

All In On Red

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All In On Red

by [birdfeet](#)

Summary

“You have a bleeding heart, Soot.” Niki hissed. “And a stubborn curiosity that would kill even the luckiest of men. So, figure it out now. You want to help Red, right?”
Wilbur nodded.

“Then help him or leave him.”

OR Wilbur Soot is a mechanic in a dystopian city, trying to fix what is broken. Tommy fights giant robots for a living.

Notes

I wrote this instead of working on Black Honey. Oh well, I've had this idea rolling around for a bit. Good excuse to actually write it.

Thanks to thanotaphobia (blue000jay) for putting on the DSMP Spin The Wheel event. I totally didn't write half of this panicked last minute. Nope.

My prompt was crimeboys cyberpunk angst.

Anyways, read the tags because this gets a bit dark at the end. Enjoy!

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Wilbur was certain the tips of his fingers were permanently stained with grease and oil. The grime was a constant companion under his nails, chipped and torn from years of work. The callouses along his fingers and palms, hardening his knuckles. His hands were the hands of a child of the Dregs, sculpted and worn and covered in tiny scars from scavenging, from finding the strength and nimbleness to survive. Wilbur loved his hands, even with the three biotech fingers on his right hand when he had crushed it in a shifting hov-bike engine. They were his.

These hands were his job as a grease monkey. Able to grip and hold heavy machinery, able to twist the tiniest screws. If Wilbur lost his hands, he lost everything.

It's why he had dumped ludicrous amounts of credits on those three fingers. Crushing his hand had been a death sentence. He had poured hours into customizing them, making sure that the replacements were better than the originals.

They were his life in the Dregs.

Wilbur had opened up shop in a small garage he had managed to rent for cheap. It belonged to the diner next door. Wilbur had managed to befriend the owners – Niki and Jack – and scored the tiny room. His tools lined the walls, a simple jack setup in the middle. Strings of lights lined the ceiling, and Wilbur had thrown up a few subtle anti-corp posters. Nothing that would get him arrested if the enforcers stopped by, but enough to connect to the right people. His shop wasn't anything special, but you didn't expect much from grease monkeys in the Dregs.

Their jobs were to be discreet. A grease monkey found profit in word of mouth and credits slipped under the table. They were the ones to fix illegal body-mods and find parts for robots that cost too much to pay the corps for. They stuck to the shadows.

Just how Wilbur liked it.

He ran his hands under some sanitizer. It took off most of the oil, and he wiped the rest onto a spare rag. The bags under his eyes felt heavier today for some reason. The day – or whatever the fuck you call the day cycle in Manburg – is barely half over and yet he felt exhausted.

Wilbur's newest commission lays on his work table. A cleaner robot that had started smoking. It was an easy fix; he was just going to have to make a visit to the junkyards. Maybe he would just pay a scraprat to do it. He had stocked up on snacks from Niki too. The scraprats always knew they could get a bit extra to eat from him and his bleeding heart. He would just have to get the word out he had some work...

Wilbur was broken from his thoughts by a knock at the entrance. The entire front wall is a garage door that rolls up, exposing his shop to the busy street. The knock is loud. Metal against metal. He turned to see Niki standing there with a bag of rehydrated nutrient chips. She waved with her biotech hand, and Wilbur gestured for her to step inside.

"You look terrible," Niki greeted, tossing the bag over. Wilbur caught it and snorted.

“Good to see you too.”

Niki made herself at home, hoping up to sit on his work table. She was dressed down today in a black jumpsuit and thick boots. The tech inlaid into her shaven head flickered pink and white. Her solid black eyes seemed to reflect the world around her, lined with pink eyeliner. She swung her legs, feet not even touching the ground from where she sat.

Niki was as close to a friend as Wilbur had. He handed her a chip that she accepted.

“Busy, I see,” Niki said. She gestured to the disassembled cleaner bot with the chip.

Wilbur shrugged. “Not really. Things have slowed down since that corp shop opened up a few streets down. They’ve got automated machines to do most of their repairs. I don’t think I’ve seen an actual human working there, come to think of it.”

“It’s just new,” Niki responded. “People will realize soon enough they’re paying an arm and a leg for repairs you would do for half the price. Plus, they’re Manburg corp machines. I give it a month tops before the replacement parts prove faulty.”

“Amazing, how my shit I get from the junkyards is still better than brand-new Manburg tech.”

“What can you do?” She said with a grin, exposing artificially sharpened canines.

Manburg. A city that had risen from the rubble of the chaos of democracy, installing figurehead after figurehead of empiric rulers. Government was a happy little lie kept up so that everyone could pretend to not see the credits funneled into the bank accounts of the council every time the corps wanted something. Propaganda was the lifeblood of the city state. Wilbur wasn’t even sure who the current emperor was. It wasn’t like it mattered.

He and Niki lived in the Dregs. The lowest streets of Manburg, where you were born to work until you died in a back alley, your body scooped up with the rest of the trash by the automated garbage disposal. Manburg, with its glittering towers scraping the atmosphere and its streets filled with pollution. A city of opportunity, they claimed.

Whoever *they* were could go fuck themselves.

Wilbur had clawed his way, fighting tooth and nail just to land an unstable job that could get him thrown in jail if the enforcers felt like looking a little too much into where he got his gear. He had spent all twenty-four years of his life working his ass off for the credits an upper city born used to wipe their ass.

All for this job that satisfied the itch in his fingers. For a job that let him help his people. That let him help the Dregs.

He saw his own exhaustion mirrored in Niki’s eyes. He saw it in the eyes of every denizen of the Dregs. They were a slowly dying people, shoved into the polluted cogs of a choking machine.

It was why he became a grease monkey. Even under all that fatigue, Wilbur wanted to help people. Something intrinsically human about him that made him fight for the few things he could cling to without bending over backwards for their overlords.

Wilbur glanced at Niki. It was covered pretty well with her make-up, but he could see she had her own eyebags and a tension to her shoulders. “How’s the diner going? You and Jack holding up after that new health code law?”

Niki huffed. “We’re fine. We just wiped up some new holo-displays to make the ovens look like they’re Manburg brand. I swear, if they require more equipment from corp brands I am going to be disassembling a copbot for kitchen parts.”

Wilbur laughed, but still found himself throwing a concerned glance at the very open entrance. Enforcer copbots rarely found their way this far down, and if they did, they were ten models out of date, but he couldn’t help it.

The old scars on his back twinged with the memories of angry words and heavy, electric batons.

“They’re only going hard on the health code laws because of that new chain restaurant,” Wilbur said. “I think they made a whole line of equipment for them as well.”

“I wonder if they’d shut up if a few just blew up.”

Wilbur glanced at Niki, who nonchalantly shoved a handful of chips in her mouth. They had only known each other for a few years. It was long enough that Wilbur was growing a few concerning theories about the woman lending him his work space.

Former terrorist was one of the tamer working theories, but it was certainly the strongest.

“Maybe let’s not have Jack spend your credits on bail,” Wilbur said.

Niki laughed. “We do have more important things to be spending it on. Speaking of which, are you free tonight?”

“Tonight?” Wilbur ran over his mental list of commissions he had. A few jobs he could potentially push back a bit. “Maybe. Why?”

Niki leaned forwards with a grin full of fangs. “Plug fights. You in?”

Wilbur raised an eyebrow. “How the fuck did you get an invite?”

If you had money to throw away, plug fights were the way to go. Highly modified people who installed direct ports into their spinal cords that would transfer their consciousness over into monstrous machines were called plugs. The machines were usually designed after animals, or monsters of myth. They called those machines beasts. The plug fighters would compete in these beasts, tearing each other apart for entertainment. Clubs formed around these events, specific venues hosting the fights.

Over the years it became exclusive as the corps began cracking down on mind tech. Getting into a venue required connections, or a stuffed wallet. Neither of which Wilbur had. He was born saving every credit. In the past few years after establishing himself as a grease monkey, he had grown more comfortable, but not enough that he had ever felt comfortable throwing his credits at senseless fighting.

If he wanted to see that he just needed to walk down the right alleyway.

Niki reached into her pocket and pulled out three tickets. “I’ve got connections.”

Wilbur fiddled with his biotech pinky finger. “I don’t know, Niki. My hov-bike is needing some expensive upgrades, and my fucking filter in the apartment broke again. I don’t think I can afford it.”

“You don’t gotta gamble, Wil. I got the first round of drinks, and Jack is coming with us so you know he’s buying a few rounds as well. Come on, we haven’t gotten to go out and just have fun in ages.”

He hesitated. It did sound like fun...

And it was that exhaustion in Niki’s eyes – in his *own* eyes – that convinced him. Stupid, mindless fun was a rare enough event if you didn’t want to chase it in a pipe or throw yourself into the VR-scape of a slip den to lose yourself in fantasy. Wilbur wanted to forget about the piling bills and taxes, and he wanted to forget about the eroding atmosphere and concrete jungles.

“Fine,” Wilbur admitted defeat with a smile. “But I’m driving.”

“Of course, you are,” Niki scoffed. She jumped off the work table, leaving his shop with a final wave of the tickets. “Wear something nice, Soot.”

When Wilbur was small, he used to sneak to the hov-bike bars just to ogle the sleek bikes with their engines that hummed almost silently, their bodies painted every color imaginable with beautiful designs carved into the metal, and their hover pulsers glowing in neon’s. He would sit and listen, wide eyed, as the riders would talk specs with each other, taking joy rides when a rare person would offer it up to the tiny scraprat he had been. He had been enthralled by the speed, the mechanics, the rush.

He had sworn he would save up for one. It had taken him years, but piece by piece he had bought her.

Ace. His fucking pride and joy, built from the parts he had bought and salvaged from the junk fields. Painted by his own hands, tuned to perfection. Sure, she faltered in places, and she caused him so much grief, but she was his baby.

Wilbur came to a halt on her in front of Niki and Jacks shared apartment, shooting them a quick message on his comm. They appeared shortly after, both changed out of their usual diner wear and into outfits more suitable for a club.

Niki wore a black skin-tight crop top that left her shoulders and neck bare, exposing the gill-like tech inlaid into her neck, and biotech arm. Hanging around her arms was the fluffiest pale pink jacket, the tech in her skull lightened to match it. Baggy pants hung around her hips, straps of pink and white hanging from it. Her boots had a solid five-inch platform to them, letting her finally stand level with Jack.

Jack himself was dressed more simply. The entire top half of his head was biotech, forming a bare skull appearance that ended just above his jaw, and that tech trailed down the back of his neck to replace both arms and the top half of his chest and shoulders. Dual blue and red eyes glowed from their metal sockets. His body was covered in a simple black tunic and pants with lines of glowing red and blue showing off the slim fit.

Jack gave an appreciative whistle as Wilbur greeted them.

“New paint?”

“Got tired of the snakes,” Wilbur said, patting her sides. Ace was repainted in black with scatterings of white that looked like stars. Streaks of reds, yellows, and blues traced her curves and drew your eyes along her whole build. The saddle was reupholstered with orange faux leather, yellow arrows leading down it. The hov-pulsers were reprogrammed to burn red. Wilbur had spent hours on the job, and he was damn proud of it.

Even when she had randomly started up and pulsed paint all over him.

“Gorgeous,” Jack said approvingly. Wilbur grinned.

“This new?” Niki walked up to him and straightened his jacket. He nodded. Wilbur had thrown together the few clothes he had that weren’t for work. A skin-tight yellow tunic under a cropped black jacket that held a few patches he had fished out of junk fields over the years. Baggy pants covered in pockets and straps hung from a belt cinched at his waist, but he still wore his steel toed boots and fingerless gloves with reinforced knuckles. A simple chain with a green gemstone – an emerald, he thought it was called – hung around his neck.

While the clothes were new, the necklace was something Wilbur had just always had. His first memory was of being a filthy scraprat in the streets, his tiny fists clenched tight around that necklace like it meant something.

He wasn’t sure if it did. Maybe he had just found it in the dumpsters. Who fucking knew, but it made Wilbur’s chest warm when he kept it nearby. He could trick himself into believing it meant something.

“You look good, man!” Jack slapped his shoulder. Niki nodded, finally satisfied with his jacket even though it was about to get messed up on the ride.

“Thanks,” Wilbur said, and patted the seat behind him.

The two climbed on behind him, looping arms around the waist of the person in front of them. Wilbur revved the engine, letting her purr turn into a quiet roar under their legs. The hov-pulsers pushed them up a bit more, and Wilbur let his grin turn wild.

He let go of the brakes and they shot off into traffic.

Niki let out a surprised – but gleeful – yelp into his ear. The lights turned into blurs; holo-billboards became flashes of color. The neon lights of Manburg's streets were streaks and Wilbur wove his way through other hov-bikes and cars, racing the mag-lev train that screamed its way along the tracks. In these moments, as Wilbur raced nothing and his heart beat like a bass drum against his ribcage, pounding in his ears, he felt free. The shit of this city turned into something wild and untamed. Lights and noise, moving on instinct as he dodged corners and bared his teeth against the wind.

It was meaningless and reckless defiance, but Wilbur felt at home in it. He pushed himself always faster, and let the small shrieks from Niki and Jack at his tight turns fuel his laughter.

Come on, Ace, he urged her on. *Work with me, baby*.

And, of course, she choked and slipped. Wilbur screeched out a curse as Niki and Jack screamed, but he righted her soon enough.

“Petulant,” he said to her, and she hummed in return.

It didn't take them long to reach the venue. Eventually, the street led them underground, even farther into the depths of the Dregs. The gray, smog-covered sky disappeared and was replaced by stone. Down here it was even more packed, but Wilbur knew his way through traffic and crowds, and soon he was pulled into a parking place, letting Ace rumble to a standstill.

“You're so fucking lucky we're both bald,” Jack grumbled, helping Niki off the hov-bike.

Wilbur laughed and ran his hands through his windswept hair. They came away dusted with gold glitter he had forgotten was mixed into his hair product for the night. Niki rushed over to him, readjusting the jacket and muttering about the wind fucking up his hair. She tapped her biotech arm, a small reflective holo-screen popping up.

“Here.” She let him take a look at himself. “Fix it.”

Wilbur rolled his eyes but complied, brushing his hair across his face in a way that hopefully looked artfully windblown instead of just plain chaotic. His deep red eyes scanned his face, noting that his cheeks were flushed from the wind.

The exhaustion was gone in the moment.

“Come on,” Jack said, eyes locked on the venue. “I want to get drunk, not preen for the mirror.”

Already the ground thumped with the beat of music. The venue was tucked away, hidden in the twisting streets and deep within the stacking levels of Manburg's buildings. It was

unassuming, for the most part. Black brick without a single window towered up several stories before merging into the stone and earth above. A flickering green and white neon sign read *BITCH SLAP UNDERGROUND*, paired with a simplistic design of a face getting slapped.

A line extended down the street, but Niki led them straight to the door, waving the tickets in the face of a terrifying looking bouncer. They scanned them before giving a small grunt and opening the door, letting the loud music and roar of the packed crowd inside wash over them in the darkness, broken up by strobing lights.

Wilbur wasn't a stranger to bars and clubs. Vices were humanity in this world. A thing to cling to that makes you real. Wilbur knew his way around alcohol like a lover. He knew all the different narcotics— which ones he could handle and the ones to avoid like the plague. As soon as he entered *Bitch Slap* he noticed the red doors leading off to slip dens. Rooms where you got drugged out of your mind and entered the VR-scape. He noticed a well-stocked bar taking up the right corner wall, populated heavily. The air was thick with the smoke of toxstiks, and the beat of the music pounded through his body like blood.

It was addicting.

Noise, filling his lungs. Lights, soaking into his pores. It was debauchery and life.

He felt a grin spread across his face as Niki grabbed his hands, dragging him to the dance floor. Jack yelled that he was getting drinks over the thud of music, but he was soon lost to the roll of bodies on the dance floor.

“I fucking hate this song!” Niki shouted at him with a breathless laugh, and pulled him into a wild, mindless dance.

Bitch Slap was set up so the main entrance led to a wide empty floor where lights flashed and you lost yourself in the crowds and tempo. Around the walls were the bar and many booths. Scantly dressed androids prowled through them, offering drinks and toxstiks along with heavy lids and predatory smiles. A few red doors spotted the left wall, but the main distraction was a wide-open entrance on the far end. As Wilbur and Niki danced their way closer, breath left him.

An arena sat lowered fifty feet into the ground, at least hundred yards long and wide, and lined with reinforced spiked walls. The arena floor was covered in packed dirt, stains of oil and spare shards of metal scattered about. There were two massive doors on either end where Wilbur assumed the beasts would emerge from. Hanging above those doors were messes of wires and straps. Tiered platforms surrounded the arena, already filling with those excited for the real attraction of the night. Spotlights hung above the arena, giving it light like nowhere else in *Bitch Slap*.

“Woah,” Wilbur said.

“Jack put some money on Warden.” Niki pointed up at the holo-screens hanging over the arena where scrolling names and images of competitors were displayed.

Currently on the screen facing them was a broad chested man with a terrifying mask covering his face. Smoke curled from the mask's vents, and solid black eyes stared in cold defiance. He wore a tight, sleeveless black shirt exposing green geometric tech crawling up his arms and neck, disappearing under the mask. His hair was shaved into a short mohawk and dyed green. Behind him was his beast.

His beast was like a cross between a lion and a lizard. A massive thick body with clawed paws and a mane of sharpened metal. That same metal plating ran along its body like scales, narrowing down to a thick battering ram of a tail. The head itself was the most lizard-like. Blocky, with thin eyes and a long snout where a dripping tongue lolled out. Razor sharp teeth filled the long mouth that curved like it was grinning.

The beast stalked behind the man, towering twice his height. Steam burst from exhaust ports, clouding over both of them to be replaced with a steadily crawling number of credits that was reaching near five-hundred thousand.

“What the fuck?” Wilbur laughed incredulously. “That’s... that’s so much.”

Niki laughed and twirled Wilbur back into the crowd. “Warden has been climbing the ranks lately. Some idiots think he’s actually got a chance of taking down Red.”

“Red?”

“You’ll see,” Niki said, flashing her fangs as the song changed to something even more upbeat and throbbing. The crowd cheered and turned into a whirlpool of sweat and noise and motion.

Jack appeared at some point, clutching three glasses of something bright blue and covered in whipped cream. They retreated to a booth, enjoying the burn of sweet booze and catching up under the cover of the venue’s chaos. Jack snorted his drink at one point, coughing and hacking as Niki and Wilbur howled with laughter.

Occasionally the loudspeaker overhead would crackle, calling out different plug fighters' bets opening and closing. Names like The Captain, or Mad Dog, would be spoken with no meaning. The last one- Red- was met with a roar of cheers from the steadily filling crowd. There was a rush to the betting window.

Wilbur glanced at Niki with a questioning gaze, but she just smiled around her straw.

“He’s popular,” Jack grumbled. “Been fighting for fuckin years and barely loses anymore. Better fuckin lose tonight, I put down good money on Warden...”

Niki just laughed and patted his shoulder. “We’re here to have fun.”

“I’ll have more fun if I don’t lose my credits, Niks!”

The speaker crackled with one last announcement:

“THE FIGHTS WILL BEGIN SHORTLY.”

“Let’s get a good view.” Niki took the boys' hands and dragged them through the crowd rushing towards the arena. They made it near halfway up the tiers, as close to dead center as they could make it. Surprisingly, it wasn’t that bad of a view. The majority of the crowd was plastered around the arena as close as they could get. Already shouts were being thrown, fists pounding on the forcefield barrier encasing the field. From this vantage point, however, Wilbur could see everything.

And then it went pitch black.

The crowd screamed in approval as the music kicked up. A massive holo-projection of a forty-foot-tall man flickered to life in the center of the crowd. His face was pure white and completely smooth, like a floating orb above his body. It was only broken up by a simple smiley face that glitched around. He wore a sleeveless black tunic and tight black pants.

He looked otherworldly and manic.

“Y’ALL READY FOR A FUCKING FIGHT?!” The projected man yelled, and the crowd roared in response. Wilbur found himself screaming along, caught up in the excitement. Jack and Niki cheered as well, hands clapping and thrust into the air.

“You all know me,” the man said. “Who am I?”

“DREAM!” The crowd yelled back.

“That’s fucking right! But this isn’t about me, is it? It’s about these plugs!”

Two spot lights clicked on.

One person stood on each end of the arena before the mess of wires and straps. They jumped around, hyping up the crowds. Their faces appeared on the holo-screens above, along with their stage names. Striker and Hellfire. There seemed to be a decent amount bet on the two, but it was obvious these were not the star players of the night.

They were the warm up.

The announcer yelled again, introducing the two and listing off a few facts about each. Apparently, they were both new to the scene and had made it past the first few fights alive.

At that, Wilbur turned to Niki with concern. “You can fucking *die* doing this?”

“Not really die,” she responded. “More like getting so overloaded that your brain shorts out and you enter a comatose state. It’s rare, though. Mostly newbie idiots who don’t know what they’re doing and just built their beast plug wrong.”

It didn’t feel all that reassuring.

“Now get strapped in,” Dream yelled. “We know the rules, yeah? Winner immobilizes the opponent. Forfeiting is a pussy move but feel free to tap out. Don’t destroy my arena too much. Attacking anything not made of tech is an instant disqualification, and if you fucking

dare attack your opponent's real body or any of my lovely patrons, I will have you dragged out back and shot. We got it?"

"GOT IT!" The crowd echoed.

"Yeah, yeah, I know you fuckers got it."

The crowd laughed.

"Now let's get this fucking show on the road!"

At that, the holo-projection vanished. Wilbur turned his attention back to the plug fighters, who were now tangled strategically in the straps. Each one supported their bodies, keeping them hanging just behind the entrances of the arena. Wires were tapped to certain vitals, and each held a thick cord. Reaching behind them, they each ducked their heads and Wilbur saw the port.

A hole had been bored into the back of their necks. Right where the spine connected to the skull, a metal port had been permanently carved into them, tech etched out down their spines. Each slotted the cord into the plugs. They clicked into place and the bodies went limp.

The spot lights shifted to the arena as muffled roars and screeches of metal sounded from behind the doors. Several more turned on, and the music swelled into a building tempo that got Wilbur leaning forward as far as he could. He yelled along with the crowd as they counted down.

"THREE!"

The doors began to creak open, dust billowing up as feet stomped and joined the haze of smoke.

"TWO!"

A shrill shriek pierced the air as the first beast emerged. A cat-like beast the size of a truck, covered in lashing tentacles. Striker. The second followed quickly, much the same in its catty appearance, but a bit larger with twin saw blades that whirled to life the moment it set foot into the arena. Hellfire. Both builds seemed almost rustic compared to the few Wilbur had caught flashing on the holo-screen before. Nothing like the solid build of Warden or the sleek fluidity of Nymph.

"ONE!"

A horn sounded and the beasts lunged for each other.

The sound of metal tearing was an awful grating noise, amplified tenfold by the size of the beasts. Hellfire instantly got a crippling hit in. The buzzing blade caught Striker along their side, severing several tentacles. The beast screamed in anger, and a tentacle whipped out. It wrapped around the neck of Hellfire and drug to them down. A clawed foot dug into its chest and began ripping. No sense of strategy or forethought. It was just senseless and desperate violence. Get the most hits in first. Make sure they remained on top. Destroy before they

could be destroyed. The same came from Hellfire, who frantically began kicking up, trying to dislodge Striker off of them with little success.

It was two wild, untrained animals pitted against each other to tear their bodies to pieces.

And the crowd fucking loved it.

Wilbur found himself caught up in the rush, yelling for Striker to tear their opponent to scrap metal. Niki cheered next to him, jumping up and down and yelling with bloodlust in her voice. Jack looped his arm around Niki, jumping with her as he screamed, “Get their ass! Rip them to fuckin' shreds!”

As they fought, Wilbur curiously looked to the two limp bodies. From this distance he couldn't see much, but both appeared completely out of it. Not a single muscle twitched as their minds were continuously transferred into giant mecha monsters. He would have thought they were dead if he didn't know any better.

“They can't feel any of this, right?” Wilbur yelled to his friends.

Jack shook his head. “Nah, all the pain receptors are dulled. That's how most get fried, not putting in proper pain numbing and destroying their brains with the sensation of getting their bodies torn apart.”

A shudder ran down Wilbur's spine. “Fuckin' hell.”

With a desperate screech, Striker locked their jaw around Hellfire's throat and ripped. The beast beneath them sparked and twitched for a moment. For a second it looked as if they would try and stand, but then they froze. Hellfire collapsed with a groan of metal, oil and coolant pooling into the dirt around them.

“STRIKER WINS!”

The next few fights were much the same. Dream brought the fighters out, the beasts fought, rinse and repeat. Jack remained invested the entire time, but Wilbur found himself drifting back to the bar. The pandemonium of the fights faded into the background as he took a seat. He ordered a cheap drink from the android bartender, who poured it and slid it over with a purred, “Sure thing, sweetie.”

It burned horribly going down. Wilbur winced and ordered another one.

The dance floor and bar were still decently populated, but far emptier than earlier. Wilbur had chosen a seat as close to the wall as he could, opting for a tiny bit of privacy to decompress from the adrenaline rush from before. Niki had been hyping up the last fight between Warden and Red, and he wanted some energy left for that.

With the seat he had chosen, Wilbur had a perfect view through one of the red doors that led off to the slip dens. It was open halfway, showing a long hallway lined with many more doors and hazy with smoke. As he settled into his second drink, Wilbur heard a familiar voice growl at one of the android attendants just behind him.

“Where the fuck is he?”

Wilbur looked over his shoulder to see the real-life Dream. He was practically the same except for now the white smiley face was a human face, angular and torn with three long scars running from his forehead to jaw, and a mane of blond hair that fell to his waist. He sounded furious, and a fist was clenched into the android’s uniform. The android pointed towards the cracked open red door.

Dream swore and pushed away the android. He stalked to the door. Wilbur hastily turned his attention back to his drink, avoiding eye contact and attention. Dream slammed the door open even further before turning to the closest slip den lining the hallway and yanking it open. He marched inside, the door shutting behind him.

Wilbur watched, wary.

Angry men were dangerous. Angry men who owned the entire arena of a multi-million credit, semi-illegal plug fight were *insanely* dangerous. Normally, Wilbur would take this as his cue to grab his drink and return to the arena. Put some distance between him and the man who could play god.

Instead, he stayed, carefully flicking his eyes between the drink warming in his hands and the hallway of addicts.

Minutes passed before the door slammed open. This time Dream was accompanied by someone else. Someone who was being dragged out by him, dark blond hair tangled in Dream's fist as they struggled to get free.

“Fuck off!”

It was a teenaged boy. Sixteen, maybe eighteen at most. His hair was long, wrapped in the fingers of Dream, but when he was let go it hung down to nearly the base of his neck. He wore a high collared shirt that covered his arms, his pants long as well. Most of his skin was covered, save his hands and head. A red bracelet was wrapped around his left wrist.

The boy was scowling, gesturing emphatically at Dream as he spoke. The noise of the *Bitch Slap* was too loud for Wilbur to make anything out except a word or so when it was yelled. It was clear, however, that he was upset. The boy swayed slightly on his feet, but made up for it with enraged gesturing.

Dream said something back, much calmer than the boy, but Wilbur could see furious tension in his shoulders. The kid shoved his hands into Dreams’ chest, making him take a step back.

CRACK!

Wilbur blinked. The boy was reeling back, holding his cheek and cowering. Dreams' hand was raised and his chest heaved with angry breaths as he obviously tried to gain some control back. For a split second, that action was frozen in time. The boy, Dream, and their unknown witness.

Then Dream sighed and opened his arms. The boy didn't hesitate before he stepped forward and accepted the hug offered.

What the fuck.

They parted. Dream patted the boy's back and said something. The boy tensed, but nodded and turned, making his way into the main area. Dream watched him leave for a moment before reaching forwards and closing the red door, shutting himself inside. As the boy left, his eyes were plastered to the ground, but he must have felt Wilbur's stare as he passed within feet of him.

His blue met Wilbur's red.

The slap was already fading from the kid's face, but it was there. Red fingers imprinted onto his pale skin. He looked young. Not old enough to be in a place like this, but Wilbur knew nobody really paid mind to underage drinkers these days. The boy parted his lips, those gray-blue eyes open wide. Shock. He hadn't known anyone had seen that. Then he scowled.

"What the fuck are you looking at?"

"Are you okay?"

"I—" The kid gaped, like he had been expecting something else.

He had been expected to be made fun of, Wilbur realized. His throat felt tight.

"I'm fucking fine. Worry about yourself. Dickhead," the kid, recovered enough now, threw back. He turned and disappeared into the dark mass of the crowd, blond hair melting into the rainbow of clothing and appearances.

What the fuck.

Wilbur downed his drink in one go, proud of himself for not gagging at all. He ordered two more, grabbed them, and walked back to where Niki and Jack were. He handed them out, accepting the distracted thanks he received in return.

"Last fight?" He asked.

"Yup," Jack bounced excitedly on the balls of his heels. "Warden vs Red. They've been hyping this fight up for fucking weeks! It's going to be so good."

"Red has been the reigning champ for near three years now," Niki explained. "He loses every now and again, but he's fucking amazing. It's like his beast is his real body. Of course, Warden has been absolutely demolishing the competition these last months, so there are real credits being split between the two."

“My bet's on Warden,” Jack reemphasized. “Dude’s beast is a monster! The thing has a few netherite claws on it. I heard Warden did commission work for the war machines before he ended up here.”

Niki smiled grimly, like she knew something they didn’t. “Oh, I think his work was a bit closer to home than that.”

Before Wilbur could question her, the fight ended. Scooper robots rolled out into the arena, dragging away the remains of the defeated beast. The two plugs unhooked themselves, bowing across the arena good-naturedly. Dream flicked back into the center of the field and the crowd screamed.

They knew what was coming.

“Well, hasn’t this been a show? We all having a good time?”

The crowd roared in confirmation.

Dream laughed. “Good! These fights have been entertaining. Let's give a round of applause for those winners, and most of all for those lucky bastards who bet on the right beast!”

Wilbur clapped along. His stomach twisted as he stared at the announcer. He knew he shouldn’t have seen that moment. That wasn’t meant to be seen. It was hidden away in a hallway blocked from every view except Wilbur’s.

It was pure fucking chance, but he couldn’t get the sound of that slap out of his head.

He certainly couldn’t get the hug that happened after out either.

Staring at Dream, he felt the adrenaline as if it were secondhand. He was on his feet, clapping and cheering like everyone else, but it was like bile on his tongue. Wilbur wasn’t shocked by any display of blatant abuse. Hell, it was normal to see dirty and starving children on the streets. It was the Dregs! It wasn’t unusual for every orphanage to be filled with children who flinched at every outstretched hand. Being a scraprat was a whole career for a child. This city was cruel.

Wilbur had been one of them.

It was the hug. The kindness immediately placed over that slap. Like honey luring in a fly. Like a smile of rotting teeth. It was that fucking hug that the boy had fell into without question, as if it had happened a thousand times.

Dream turned his back to Wilbur’s side of the arena, arms spread wide as he said, “But now, how about we get to what you have all been waiting for, eh? The fight you’ve been talking about for months. The fight between two titans!”

The lights went dark. The spotlights shone over the port stations.

“RED AND WARDEN!”

The two fighters stepped up to their plug ports and the crowd went insane.

Wilbur instantly recognized Warden. He was taller than Wilbur had been expecting, his muscles bulging against his tight clothing. The straps were at their limits as he laid down in them. He waved to the crowd, but he played a role and remained stoic and dangerous. The crowd ate it up, cheering his stage name like a battle cry.

Across from him was Red. Unlike everyone else who had fought, Red wore a full head helmet, only opened slightly at the back where his port was. The visor was a dull red, contrasted with the stark black of the rest of his outfit. He was relaxed as he walked up to the straps, methodical as he began tightening his lanky form in. Red was a popular cry among the fans, but he did nothing to acknowledge them.

Used to fame, apparently.

“What’s with the helmet?” Wilbur asked.

Niki responded. “Red doesn’t show his face. Barely talks, too, and when he does, he’s got a voice modulator on. He’s very private.”

“Or hiding something,” Jack said.

“You’re just paranoid.”

“And what about it? Saved our asses enough times. I got a good sense for these things.”

Wilbur tuned out their bickering and turned his attention back to the fight. Warden and Red were now plugged in. The ground shook as their beasts came to life. The lights flashed, the music picked up, and Wilbur felt himself leaning forwards subconsciously.

They were counting down, and his eyes were drawn to the slowly rising doors.

Three.

Two.

One.

Warden didn’t even wait for his door to open all the way. His beast burst out, tearing the door from the winch and slamming it into the ground with a bone-rattling roar. Synthesized spit flew from the beast’s maw, played up for show. It fucking worked. Wilbur felt primal fear rush through him as Warden slammed his paws into the packed earth, prowling closer and closer to the open and dark entrance on Red’s side.

And in a flash, there was a screech of metal and Warden was thrown into the spiked wall.

Wilbur blinked in disbelief at what he was seeing. Every beast so far had been massive tanks of metal and machinery. They were beasts made to crush. To destroy. To tear and rip and reduce their enemies to shards.

Red was not that.

Red's beast was half the size of Warden. Scratch that, Red was a third the size of Warden. The beast stood a few feet or so taller than Wilbur was at best. He was shaped with the body of a wolf. Lithe and long and covered in plates of metal painted in chipped red. The lower bits of his legs were scaled and tipped with three of what looked like netherite claws, a fourth on the heel, digging into the ground with every step. The feet looked built for speed, with larger hind legs to allow him to leap. The deadly claws shone dull in the spotlight that followed his slow and low prow around Warden's fallen form.

The head was also like a wolf, albeit a tad rounder, with an open mouth that displayed even more netherite fangs. That mouth alone cost more than everything Wilbur owned. Hell, it probably cost more than he would ever make in his life. The glowing red cybernetic eyes were surrounded by black, almost like a raccoon. The ears swiveled constantly, taking in every sound. A pair of thick spiked horns emerged next to the ears. The real threat, however, was the tail.

Or, well, tails.

Six long tails lashed about, each tipped with what looked like a netherite hook. From the build, Wilbur could tell each one could also support Red's weight, making them prehensile as well. Every inch of Red's build was built to be small, compact, and deadly as fuck.

Warden rose back up, shaken but not out. The spikes along the walls had pierced through his side, but they were shallow wounds. He roared at Red, and the crowd cheered.

What was that old story? David and Goliath?

Yeah, that one.

Red bared his fangs at Warden, and Warden lunged. Utterly unstoppable as he thundered towards the tiny form. It seemed as if Red knew that too, because at the last moment his hind legs dug into the ground and he jumped.

It was like a horrible dance. Warden would lunge, missing Red by inches as he darted away. A game of cat and mouse as Red dove between Warden's massive paws or tricked him into crashing into the spiked walls again and again.

Lunge, leap.

Dodge, crush.

It went on long enough that the cries for destruction became rabid. As Warden began to charge, Red leapt towards the wall. Pushing off of it, Red soared and landed on Warden's head. He instantly dug two of his tails into Warden's mane of metal shards around his neck. Unable to stop, the Warden ran headfirst into the wall. The arena shook, dust falling from the ceiling as the lights flickered. The crowd screamed their approval as the Warden backed up with a snarl. He shook his head, but Red was firmly latched on now.

“Knock him off!” Jack yelled.

Just to antagonize him, Niki yelled as well. “Tear his throat out!”

One of Red’s tails whipped around, faster than Wilbur could see, and lodged itself into one of Wardens eyes. Another one began tearing at Wardens throat, skidding helplessly off. The underside must have also been reinforced with netherite. There was no way those hooks couldn’t pierce through it otherwise.

Warden took advantage of the momentary panic when Red couldn’t break through his neck. He dropped to the ground and rolled, trying to crush Red beneath him. Red yelped and unlatched his hooks, jumping off just in time to get to safety. Using the momentum of his roll, the Warden was back on his feet in a flash and lunged forward. Red scrambled back, but a claw caught his side.

In every fight before, every noise seemed for show. The shrieks and roars were for intimidation, and sometimes there was an occasional yelp in surprise or fear. There had been no noise of pain, because none of them could *feel* pain.

The scream that emerged from Red made Wilbur’s heart drop, the blood leaving his face.

It was primal. It was agonized. As Wardens claw tore down his side Red screamed in what sounded like real pain. It was covered by the stomp of feet and the cries for destruction and death, but Wilbur heard it. He fucking heard that.

Wilbur shot Niki a look, and was relieved when she looked hesitant as well.

“That sounded real,” Wilbur said.

“I’m sure it was just played up.” Niki didn’t sound certain.

Red leapt back, using his strong hind legs to launch himself back at Warden. His hooks latched back onto his side, the claws on his feet digging in as he tore at his underbelly. The Warden twisted but Red was determined to stay on. His claws demolished Warden’s stomach, but just when Wilbur thought Red would’ve started tearing at the rest of him, Red reached in with his maw and locked his jaw around the Wardens insides.

And tore.

Over and over.

Warden roared again, attempting to reach back with a paw to rip Red away, but the paws were made for crushing, not gripping. Warden dropped and tried to roll, but Red was fucking insane apparently, and crawled into the hole he had torn out of Wardens gut.

It was like watching a parasite consume its host.

Warden thrashed and roared but there was nothing he could do to stop the slow destruction of his insides. Occasionally, one of Red's tails would burst through his torso, and piece by piece

Warden stopped working. The hindlegs faltered, then his head stopped turning. The steam billowed from the vents faster and faster in his panic.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Jack groaned. Niki patted his arm sympathetically.

Finally, Red tore his way out of Warden. Wilbur could only imagine the wreckage of Warden's torso, but oil and coolant poured steadily from every hole. He groaned in every step, low and constant growls humming in his throat. Red prowled around until he faced him, those eyes watching every creak and every move. Then he stopped and looked up.

The crowd was screaming for Warden’s complete destruction, but Red seemed to be waiting for something. Patiently, like a dog to his master. Wilbur followed his gaze.

Up in the darkness, right where the far wall met the ceiling, was a window Wilbur hadn’t noticed. It was almost completely in shadow, barely lit from within. Inside was Dream, standing there with a hand on his chin as if contemplating. He cocked his head slightly as Red looked up.

And then he raised a clawed hand to his scarred face with a grin, and raked it down over it.

For a split second, Red hesitated. He stepped forward, but then paused, still looking up at Dream. As if waiting for him to do something else. As if he didn’t like the answer he got. Dream just stared.

So, Red's eyes snapped to Warden, and every tail raised threateningly. He walked closer and struck, two tails digging into the sides of Warden's mouth. They pried, tearing his jaw apart. Another tail dug into his remaining eye, going deeper and deeper. The remaining three lashed and tore. It was a massacre on the goliath form that could barely shudder in retaliation.

Tear and rip.

“Holy fuck,” Niki said breathlessly.

Holy fuck indeed, Wilbur agreed silently.

The beast fights had been brutal, every single one. This wasn’t that. This was superficial. This was destruction just to destroy. Wilbur doubted Red was even hitting anything that would inhibit Warden. It was messy and vicious.

Within moments, Warden’s face was unrecognizable.

There was a hiss and a pop as Warden's real body was detached from the plug cord. He scrambled out of the straps, seething as he began to yell. His voice was drowned out in the crowd, but Wilbur got the message.

Warden was extremely upset Red had completely demolished his beast.

“Now, now,” Dream flickered into existence. “Warden, you know the rules. Fight until immobility. You could still move. Red was well within his rights.”

Warden continued to yell threats and obscenities. The crowd was loving it, joining in with their own jeers and calls that Red was going too far. That Warden should suck it up. That they should keep fighting. The Warden pointed at his destroyed beast.

“I agreed to a damn fight!” He yelled. “Not a coward’s underhanded temper tantrums!”

Dream held up a hand and a hush rushed across the arena.

“There’s a simple solution to this,” Dream looked over to Red's side where Red was climbing out of his own straps. “How about we put a hold on those bets and have a rematch in a month?”

Red froze.

Wilbur was too far away to get any good read on him, but even from here he could see Red was shaking. From rage or something else he couldn’t tell. But Red slowly raised his helmeted head until he was looking level at Dream. The impassive smiley face and the blank visor, staring each other down.

Something passed between them.

Then Red nodded once.

“Excellent!” Dream said, sounding pleased and smug. “In a month then! A final rematch!”

Warden seemed pacified and nodded as well, but shot Red an enraged glare. Red didn’t even look his way. Wilbur’s eyes were locked on the plug that barely seemed to care about the death threats being thrown his way. The moment Dream's attention moved from him, Red seemed to lose all care for the show being made. Red just hunched his shoulders and moved to disappear through the door behind him.

As he moved, Wilbur caught sight of a red bracelet wrapped around his left wrist.

Niki told Wilbur where the repair rooms were. She didn’t question it much at first, but when he quickly left the arena, she had followed, calling after him in concern. She and Jack followed him uneasily as he pushed his way through the crowd. Something was curled in his gut as he marched forwards. Something curious and sick.

He didn’t think. He just felt and walked.

The repair rooms were even farther underground. Deep under the arena, where the plugs could store their beasts and rest. Niki quickly filled him in as they walked, answering his rapid and tense questions.

Plugs weren't required to live in the arenas, but all were given living spaces alongside their beasts in exchange for a fee. Some arenas even provided full apartments, but not this one. Plugs were all under contract to fight either a certain number of fights, or earn a certain amount through the bets. Becoming a plug was a lifestyle. It was heavily modifying your body and mind to be able to complete a mind transfer. It was not a decision to take lightly, and any plug took their profession seriously.

Wilbur couldn't get the sound of that slap out of his head.

Becoming a plug wasn't necessarily illegal, but you couldn't get the mods done by any corp-certified doctor or modifier. It was a process only done by the arenas and their handsomely paid surgeons. Those surgeons, according to an increasingly worried Niki, followed a strict honor code.

The code was simple, with rules that would keep dangerous beasts out of the hands of those who would use them to harm. Never modify someone with a record of abuse or murder, never modify someone from Uptop, never modify those who wouldn't sign a contract with a venue, etc. Wilbur listened tensely, waiting for the one that he knew was coming. The one that Niki said, staring at him as he stomped down the stairs.

Never modify a child.

A red bracelet.

Scream of pain, echoed from the throat of a mechanical beast.

Slap.

"Wilbur, what the fuck is going on?" Jack demanded, voice a bit slurred from all the alcohol he had drunk that night. "The show is over; we don't need to see the behind the scenes."

"Go wait upstairs then," Wilbur shot back. Just a few more flights of stairs.

"Wilbur—" Niki started, but was interrupted.

"Dude, fuck this." Jack threw up his hands and turned. "This night has been a bust anyways. I'm going back. I'll be at the bar, don't do anything fucking stupid."

Wilbur just kept walking.

"Wilbur," Niki tried again. She reached out to grab his shoulder, but he shrugged her off and whirled around. Her eyes were wide pools of pure black, her mouth opened slightly as if she wanted to say more but couldn't. Stunned by his face.

He didn't know what he was saying with his face. He felt frozen in stone. A scowl twisted his brow, his eyes hardened, and his jaw set. Wilbur felt as if he gave an inch he would crumble. Niki pulled back her hand. She didn't move. She didn't walk back up those stairs, leaving Wilbur to whatever harebrained idea his brain had half formed. She just stared.

"How do you know the code of plug modifiers?" Wilbur asked.

Niki's eyes narrowed, her lips pressing into a thin line. "Why do you want to know?"

"I saw something."

"What?"

Wilbur felt a crack form, and he squashed it down. He could break later. He could tell her later. For now, he needed to know. He *had* to know. "Red. I think there's something wrong with him. I need to know if I'm right. I need to know I'm not just connecting dots that don't exist," Wilbur answered. "Come with me?"

Niki studied him.

They had known each other for years, but it was surface level. They were just neighbors. He rented a room from her, and she brought him snacks and company. As distant as friends could be, and yet she was the closest to a friend he had ever had. She knew his stubborn pride. He knew her righteous anger.

Sometimes Wilbur wondered if they would have been better friends in war.

"I have your back," Niki answered cautiously. Like offering her hand to a feral creature. "Just don't be doing something idiotic."

Wilbur huffed out a small laugh and turned. What was he, if not a series of bad choices?

The stairs spiraled down, nearly empty except for a few employees who shot them curious looks but didn't disturb them. They weren't technically allowed down here, but nobody was stopping them so Wilbur kept going.

Grease-stained fingers, clenched tight.

The doors were heavy metal, sitting at the bottom of the stairs with a humanoid android standing beside them. Wilbur heard heavy machinery rumbling behind them, the faint sound of talking humming in its undercurrent. He moved to push them open, but was stopped by the android.

"Please present identification."

"Identify the fucks I'm giving," Wilbur spat back.

Niki shouldered in front of him, digging into her pocket. "So sorry. Here." She held up a blank white card. The android made an aborted noise, like it was shorting out. The head twitched, eyes dimming before snapping back.

"Thank you." The android stepped aside.

Niki pushed open the doors, giving Wilbur a stern glare. "You better have a good reason for all this."

"How did you do that? What was that?"

She didn't answer, and Wilbur figured that was probably the best answer she could give.

Inside was chaos. A mess of bodies and metal. Music still played over the speakers overhead but not as loudly as the club upstairs. Someone was driving a truck that was dragging the crumbled remains of Warden along. The gigantic beast scrapped and made horrible wheezing noises. The plug himself walked alongside it, talking with a man with a biotech arm and a shock of pure white hair. Around them ran workers, yelling and getting the beasts stored and plugs situated. Giant steel beams ran along the walls and ceiling, holding the whole place up. Giant doorways lined the walls, leading to storages and the arena above.

Walking through them and alongside the beasts were the plugs. Wilbur recognized several from the fights.

They were all imposing figures. Half the battle was the show the plugs put on. The sponsors they could gather, the bets they could collect. Many carried impressive mods, and all seemed muscled and imposing. Warden stood a whole head above Wilbur, he estimated. His arms were definitely bigger than his head. He saw Nymph – a plug whose beast seemed inspired by insects – was laughing with someone who appeared to be her mechanic. Her back rippled with muscles, and her mechanic stumbled as she gave him a friendly lug to the arm.

Nothing like what Red had been. Skinny and cowering.

Why was Red different? Why was Red so young?

Why was *that kid* out of everyone here him? Why was he Red?

“This way,” Niki said. She nodded her head at a side door labeled Commons Area. Wilbur let her take the lead, slightly overwhelmed by the noise and commotion. Still, his fingers itched to get ahold of those beasts. He wanted to know them. Understand what made them tick.

The commons were fairly empty. The two passed a few workers, but they were hurrying into the main room to help pack up the beasts. They blended in, walking with all the confidence of someone who belonged. You learned quickly in the Dregs how to pretend you belong everywhere.

“This way leads up to the living areas,” Niki said. “Red is either here or—”

Suddenly, Niki grabbed his arm and yanked him into a side room. Wilbur's yelp of surprise was cut off by her hand, pressing him back. He froze and realized why she had grabbed him.

Dream's voice echoed down the hall. Still cheery and full of bravado. Still almost taunting in its lilt. He was laughing before he said, “And again, so sorry about this, but I just don't think it's a good fit.”

“Yeah, sure.” An unknown voice said, sounding frustrated and tense. “Just send me my credits for the fix up before the match. He's a bastard to work for, anyways.”

“Of course. My associate will see you out.”

“Fuck,” Niki breathed. Her eyes darted around the hallway before landing on another doorway down where they had come from. She dragged Wilbur behind her, kicking open the door and hauling them inside before closing it. She whipped around, glaring at Wilbur. “Whatever you’re doing, do it so we can fucking leave.”

Footsteps passed the door.

Wilbur’s heart was in his throat.

“You have a bleeding heart, Soot.” Niki hissed. “And a stubborn curiosity that would kill even the luckiest of men. So, figure it out now. You want to help Red, right?”

Wilbur nodded.

“Then help him or leave him.”

Wilbur took a steadying breath and opened the door. From down the hall he could hear Dream, fainter now but the words grew clearer as he crept forwards. It sounded like he was talking to someone in one of the rooms labeled Break Room. Wilbur’s hands clenched, nails digging into his palms as he walked closer.

This was stupid.

He shouldn’t care.

But he was always going to. That was just who he was. His hand reached up and tangled briefly in the emerald necklace hanging around his neck. Perhaps it was all in his head, but the cool metal felt comforting for a moment. A reminder that maybe he had come from someone who cared.

It was his blood.

“—and really, you can afford a new mechanic,” Dream’s voice, now dripped with that taunt curled into Wilbur’s ears. “You were complaining about how they fucked up the back legs anyway.”

“This is the eighth fucking mechanic in the past four months! I’m starting to end up on fucking blacklists with the way you’re getting rid of them.”

That was Red. Angry and frustrated. The voice was different with the voice modulator, but it was the same lilt. Wilbur met Niki’s eyes for a brief moment as he looked over his shoulder. Her own shoulders were tensed. A stupid idea formed in his mind. There was no way it could work but... maybe. That was all he needed. maybe. Wilbur gestured for Niki to wait and hide. She frowned, but nodded and ducked into a side room.

“Just hire a new one.”

“Right,” Red scoffed sarcastically. “I’ll just go do that, because I totally have those connections.”

“Ask Ponk,” Dream said dismissively. “I’m sure he could fix up your beast.”

Red let out a harsh and bitter bark of a laugh. “You just burnt that fucking bridge, remember?”

“Oh, come on now. Sam doesn’t hold grudges like that.”

“... Dude.”

Dream laughed. “You’ll figure it out. You have a whole month!”

“That’s not near enough time and you know tha—”

Wilbur walked around the corner into the room. It wasn’t large, mostly filled with overstuffed couches that filled a small pit in the center of the room. Off to the side was a small kitchen, a few forgotten and half-eaten snacks scattered about. Leaning against the wall was Dream, his hair now tied back. Sitting on the couch was Red. His helmet was still on, but he now wore an oversized jacket that drowned him in fabric. His arms were crossed over his chest, and he jumped when he saw Wilbur.

Red bracelet, half hidden in his folded arms.

“Can I help you?” Dream asked tersely.

“Couldn’t help but overhear you need a mechanic,” Wilbur said without thinking. “I happen to know a pretty good one.”

“Oh yeah?” Red said. It was his voice, full of that same defensive anger.

It was him.

Wilbur held up his stained hand in a wave, a smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. “Never met a machine I couldn’t figure out.”

“No fucking way—” Red started to say, but Dream interrupted him by stepping forwards.

“You got any credentials?”

Wilbur dug out his comm and pulled up his short credentials list. There weren’t many official certifications he could get as a grease monkey. His whole job was to fly under the corp radar and fix what they would rather just be thrown away. But it seemed to be enough because Dream nodded.

“There you go.” Dream laughed, grinning with far too many teeth at Red. “A mechanic, just like you asked for.”

“You’re kidding.” Red stood. “You’re just letting this guy walk in out of nowhere and fix my beast. He’s probably shit!”

“And that’s your problem now.” Dream glanced back down at Wilbur’s comm before meeting his eyes and holding out his hand. “Soot, is it? Meet Red here tomorrow at 0800 and see what you can do about his disaster of a beast.”

Wilbur shook his hand.

Red was practically shaking. His fists were tight at his sides, and even with his face hidden under the helmet, Wilbur could picture the flush of rage across his cheeks and his clenched jaw. He seemed torn between fighting this or letting it slide. Dream didn’t give him any time to decide as he let go of Wilbur’s hand and left, clipping his shoulder against Wilbur’s.

“Try not to lose another mechanic, Red!”

And far too suddenly they were alone. For a moment that stretched on, Wilbur stared at Red and Red stared at him. He towered above him, looking down at the kid who was far too young to be here. Red sighed and reached back behind his head. There was a click and the helmet melted away.

His blond curls stuck to his skin with sweat, and there was a line along his cheek where the helmet had been pressed against it, but that was nothing compared to the purpling bruise sitting on the opposite cheek. It looked like someone had torn a chunk out of the top of his left ear, but other than the plug port Wilbur knew was hidden under his clothing, he couldn’t see any other mods. Red scowled, nose scrunched and eyes hardened.

“You can’t blackmail him, if that’s what this is.”

Wilbur blinked. “What?”

“What do you want, huh? Credits? Want some VIP seat for the fights? You aren’t going to get it. He doesn’t care... he won’t... you’re nobody, bitch. You can’t get anything from him and I... I don’t give a fuck about Dream’s reputation, so you can fuckin’ shove whatever blackmail you think you have up your ass, pal. Nobody is going to believe you. They never believe anyone. So go fuck off and enjoy the rest of the event.” Red’s shoulders were hitched up to his ears.

“W-what? No, I don’t want—”

Red barreled on, words becoming fast and frantic. “Look, just forget you saw anything, okay? It won’t end well for either of us. Did Dream put you up to this? Of course, he would do that. Find some two-bit mechanic and trick them into fixing it for me. He probably told you to sit at that bar. God, what a fucking... of course he... fuck!” Red took in a shaky breath and pointed at Wilbur. “Just fuck off. You don’t have to come back, man. It’s not worth it.”

“Kid, calm down,” Wilbur tried to say, but Red was on a roll.

“No, no, no! Fuck off! You didn’t see anything. I’ll pay you five grand if you just leave now. Six grand. Dude, just take the credits and leave!”

Red had rushed forwards, yanking out a battered comm and tapping quickly to pull up a credits transfer. Wilbur took a nervous step back.

“I don’t want your credits.”

“Right,” Red scoffed. “Look, just tap your comm here and—”

“I’ll see you tomorrow, kid,” Wilbur said. The flip between begging and angry spats made Wilbur’s head spin. He stepped back again and Red lurched forwards. He grabbed his arm, but the moment he touched it he yanked his hand back as if burned. Red gasped loud.

“Fuck, shit, sorry. You can’t... you can’t come back.”

“It’ll be okay,” Wilbur said softly. “I’m just here to fix your beast.” *I’m here to fix this.*

“You’re lying.”

“Believe what you want.”

“I will. Because you’re a *bitch*. F-fuck you,” Red spat, and his voice cracked.

“See you around, Red.”

Wilbur walked away, leaving Red standing on the couch with one arm clutched to his chest and those gray-blue eyes wide. He didn’t know what to say. He didn’t know how to make it better. Not now. All of this had been actions based on emotions. Wilbur had always known he was impulsive. He made decisions based on the tumult inside him, long over thought until he was moving and speaking without reason or rhyme.

Red was just that. An impulsive choice, so that when it came down to it ,Wilbur had no answers. He didn’t know what to do.

But he had a chance, and he could use that.

Wilbur met back up with Niki and flashed her a tight smile.

“I can help him.”

Niki reached up and squeezed his arm. “Okay.”

_____.

He had a blinding headache. The cheap liquor from the night before was doing Wilbur no favors as he grimaced behind a pair of shitty sunglasses. Jack had made him a hangover cure, and it sat cold and worryingly viscous in a mug in his hands. Wilbur lifted it and took a sniff.

It smelled like old cheese. Gross.

It was quiet in *Bitch Slap Underground*. A stark contrast to the chaos and revelry of the night to the morning. As Wilbur had stepped inside, he had almost tripped over a few passed out party-goers, dead to the world next to pools of their own vomit. He wrinkled his nose.

There was no one there to greet him, or show him where Red's beast would be, so Wilbur had returned to the depths. There had been a bit more life the farther down he went, but it seemed most of the employees hadn't arrived yet, and the plugs themselves were still asleep. Wilbur just hefted his tool bag onto his shoulders, took a shuddering drink of Jack's disgusting hangover cure, and followed the signs to the repair rooms.

From there he followed the singing.

He walked down the hallway and reached a massive room that towered so high he could barely see the ceiling. Rigging hung everywhere, beasts in every form of assembly hung from wires or resting in their areas. A few robots rolled around, keeping the area clean and running tools. It seemed void of human life, but a few rows down, Wilbur could hear an adolescent's voice, absolutely belting out lyrics from shitty pop music.

Red's beast was curled in the marked off area. The legs were already disassembled, and a few tables and tool chests surrounded it. Tubes were attached, draining the coolant and oil. The mouth was propped open, and sitting before it was Red himself.

He was dressed completely differently today. It took Wilbur back a bit. Gone was the sleek and professional looking outfit with its streamline cut. Instead, Red was dressed in a loose gray tank top and a pair of baggy black pants covered in multicolored patches Wilbur assumed had been done by Red himself. The jacket from the night before was thrown over the beast's detached paw, and a pair of headphones covered Red's ears.

The kid was bobbing his head in time to the music only he could hear, eyes and hands focused on the work before him. Wilbur found himself smiling as he watched him sing, uncaring if he was in tune or if his voice cracked over the higher notes.

Red turned and screamed.

"Fucking Christ!" Red screeched, yanking off his headphones and jumping back to stumble back. "Warn a guy, would you?"

Wilbur winced; his headache spiked at the loud noise. "Prime, kid keep it down. It just sounded like you were having fun there."

"I was, until you showed your ugly mug. You fuckin' scared me."

Wilbur hopped down into Red's area, carefully balancing his hangover cure. "It's 0800. I told you I was coming back. How's it looking in there?"

Red narrowed his eyes. "I'm just messing around. Doing nothing. I'm the plug, remember?"

"Right. Then who hooked up the drain tubes? And opened the oscillator correctly? Also looks like *someone* started disassembling the legs and was organizing the parts by level of

priority, which also included putting that busted biotech ligament in a nanobot processor. I don't know many people who know that that's the first step for damaged biotech on a non-sentient machine, and, well," Wilbur looked around dramatically before meeting Red's eyes again. "I don't see anyone else around here, kiddo."

Red scowled. "Okay, go fuck yourself, show off."

Wilbur chuckled and set down his tool bag. "Didn't answer my question."

"The beast is honestly fine," Red said. "All the damage was mainly superficial. I just need upgrades for next time."

"Upgrades?" Wilbur raised an eyebrow. "This thing is nearly military levels of expensive. What more could it need?"

"He tore through my sides," Red pointed to the long gashes along the torso of the beast. "I was thinking of replacing them with something that's a bit more flexible. Maybe segmented parts, like a snake build. That way I can dodge better. That or I need to buff it, but I don't have the credits for more netherite. Dream cut my—"

Red cut himself off abruptly and shot Wilbur a nervous look. "I mean, I blew all my winnings on stupid shit. Just a dumb plug celebrity, that's me."

Wilbur stared, letting the silence grow uncomfortable.

"What the fuck are you drinking?" Red asked, attempting to fill the silence. He rocked on his feet, fingers flying over the tool in his hands.

Wilbur pushed his sunglasses onto his head and winced at the sludge. "Uh, not really sure. I think there's an egg in here. Maybe some synthetic spinach. For all I know this could just be green cum."

Red barked out a surprised laugh. "What the fuck?"

"My work neighbor made it for my hangover. Nothing like cheap vodka to kill the next day." Wilbur said with a wry smile.

"Oh yes. Alcohol. The booze. Hardstuff. The drink." Red nodded sagely. "I can relate."

"Shut up, you're definitely not old enough to drink."

Red bristled, filled with false indignation but Wilbur heard the layer of fear as he said, "No! I can drink. I'm old!"

"Uh-huh."

The awkward silence was back, stretching as Wilbur waited for Red to try and claim an age, but Red avoided it and coughed. "Anyways. I need to figure out the pieces I can salvage before I figure out the upgrade. Can't be wasteful, ya know."

“Course,” Wilbur said, letting it go. “There’s too much junk in this city anyways. Let’s see what we’re working with.”

Red showed Wilbur where the rigging was, and between the two of them they quickly got the beast suspended. Wilbur started looking it over, jotting down notes as he opened ports and ran his hands over parts that looked busted. It really was a beautiful piece of machinery. Even turned off and dormant, he could feel the thrum of power in it. Something loved and carefully crafted.

Red helped, but he never really took his eyes off of Wilbur. As Wilbur finished up his first analysis, Red sat on the paw that had his jacket on it. “Gonna be honest, I didn’t think you were coming.”

“Why not?”

Red shrugged. “You aren’t getting anything out of this. All the mechanics recently have only been here because Dream paid them a shitload, or the *‘honor of fixing plug beasts’* because that’s such a big deal around here.” His voice was tinged with bitterness as he folded his arms and said, “The last few didn’t even know what they were doing.”

“Is that why your connection wasn’t suppressed at the fight?”

Red froze. “W-what?”

“At the fight last night. When Warden hit you, you didn’t just brush it off. It hurt you. I don’t think many noticed, because why would it have hurt? But it did, didn’t it?”

Red gaped for a few seconds more before he said, “Y-yeah. The idiot mechanic who set up my beast last night forgot to replace my inhibitor and it shorted out right before I plugged. How the fuck did you notice that?”

Wilbur shrugged.

Red stared before he shook his head. “Fuckin weirdo. Whatever, I think I should get this bit segmented, but that could fuck up the connector here...”

Wilbur listened to Red talk and talk. He wasn’t sure what he had been expecting from Red, but he was pleasantly surprised at how intelligent he was. He rattled off the names of machinery parts like a seasoned grease monkey. His hands danced over the beast with such familiarity that Wilbur was reminded of how he touched Ace. How he could take her apart and piece her back together in his sleep. The confidence that every part was built with care.

Red slipped cusses into his sentences like punctuation. He laughed easily, and flinched away just as much. The arrogance Wilbur had expected from a plug was there. Good god it was there. Red took exaggerated offense to every flaw Wilbur pointed out, and made outrageous claims about his abilities once he seemed okay with the fact that Wilbur knew he was smart. But even with the casual insults and arrogance, Wilbur felt something warm curl in his chest.

Red was so bright.

Hours slipped together as Wilbur found himself enjoying the work of disassembling and constructing this plan of upgrades with this kid. It wasn't long before they were trading insults like old friends. Wilbur felt it pinch his throat with just how *familiar* Red felt. How easily he slipped to Wilbur's side.

It was terrifying and it was exhilarating.

It was something that was theirs.

He learned that Red loved music and would fill silence with mumbled songs or hums. He learned that he could never stay still for long, drumming his fingers or dancing around on the balls of his feet. He learned Red wanted to see a real cow someday. He learned Red didn't leave the venue often, if at all. He learned Red was so smart, but was always shocked when complimented on it.

He learned Red was a bit annoying at first, but warm and made jokes that brought tears to his eyes.

"I'm Wilbur," he said as they took a break, sitting on the massive pieces of the beasts' shell they had taken apart. Red jerked his head up at Wilbur's sudden introduction after hours of existing together without names. Without that perfunctory gesture of identity. "Wilbur Soot. I'm a grease monkey, actually. Most of those credentials I showed your boss were forged, honestly."

Red snorted. "Of course they were."

"Man's gotta make a living somehow."

Red hesitated for a second before saying, "I'm Tommy."

Wilbur smiled. "Tommy. That suits you."

"Yeah, well, Wilbur doesn't suit you. Sounds like a name for a dickhead."

"Oh, so I'm not a dickhead?"

"... wait, no. Wilbur is perfect."

"Brat," Wilbur laughed, and Tommy grinned.

Before they knew it, Wilbur was checking his comm to see the late hour. He cursed under his breath, remembering his massive list of commissions he had pushed off in favor of returning to the *Bitch Slap*. He gathered his tools.

"Fuck, I need to go," he said.

Tommy shoved his hands into his pockets. The easy smile Wilbur had proudly managed to bring to his face had twisted into that old familiar scowl. "Oh."

Wilbur paused, turning to Tommy. "I am coming back."

The scowl faltered. “Oh.”

“Same time tomorrow? I probably won’t be able to stay as long. Got my actual job to deal with, but I think we’re making good progress here and—”

“Yeah,” Tommy interrupted. “Sounds good.”

Wilbur reached out hesitantly. His hand hung there in the space between them. An invitation to step forwards. To accept a hug, a handshake, anything that was friendly and kind. Tommy stepped back, eyes flitting between his hand and his eyes.

He drew his hand back. “See you later, kiddo.”

“Whatever,” Tommy turned around, picking up a wrench. “Don’t let the door hit you on the way out.”

What had gone wrong? One moment Tommy was bright laughs and crude jokes, the next he was back to that cold shell. Was it something he had said? He was coming back. Maybe... maybe he just had to prove it.

He would prove it.

Wilbur came back every day. Every day Tommy seemed shocked that he came back. Every time he left Tommy grew cold and pushed him away.

But they grew closer. Wilbur brought Tommy food when he mentioned in an offhand way that he had never tried some of Wilbur’s favorite snacks. Tommy brought a little radio he kept in his room and they traded songs while they worked. They swapped pieces of themselves like they swapped tools. Casually, and without thought.

The meaning was there, however. Wilbur felt that warmth curl between his ribs every time Tommy laughed, and every time he smiled.

Most days it was just him and Tommy in the hangar, but the closer to the next event they got, the more mechanics and plugs they saw. Warden, always accompanied by the white-haired mechanic Wilbur learned was named Ponk, would sometimes stop to appraise their work and talk a bit with Wilbur. A few stopped to exchange semi-friendly words with Wilbur, but no one said a word to Tommy. The most Wilbur ever saw was a plug who greeted him with a short, “Red” and moved on.

“They’re scared of getting near me,” Tommy said when Wilbur asked. “I... uh... don’t have a good history with *friends* around here.”

And it was left at that.

The first time Wilbur called Tommy a friend he flinched so hard he smashed the delicate computer chip he was holding. After that Wilbur kept it easier, with small nicknames of kiddo, king, mate. The first time Tommy hesitantly called him a friend Wilbur couldn't stop grinning for hours.

Slowly, Tommy accepted casual touch as well. The first was a fist bump after two days of sweating over a finicky chip and regulator. The next was a hand clasp as Wilbur helped him stand from where he sat. After that was a side hug when Wilbur left for the day. Day by day, Wilbur learned just how much Tommy craved those touches.

Hugs. High fives. A hand ruffling through his hair.

He supplied them all and warmth grew.

Some days Tommy showed up late. Those days he wore long sleeves and didn't meet Wilbur's eyes. He wouldn't touch him on those days.

Some days Tommy swayed on his feet, half asleep as he stumbled about his tools. Wilbur started to keep thick blankets in the tool cabinet in case Tommy needed to curl up under his beast's paw, sleeping while Wilbur aligned carburetors.

Dream never showed up, but Wilbur started noticing the other mechanics watching. He felt their eyes on the back of his neck. Every time Tommy laughed so hard he snorted his drink up his nose, or whenever Wilbur would drag him into a quick hug after Tommy fixed a difficult piece, he felt them.

Fuck them. They could watch all they wanted.

Tommy was smiling, and that was all Wilbur cared about. That bright kid fitting into his life, becoming so fucking important that Wilbur couldn't wait to return and dreaded leaving. He wanted Tommy in his life for as long as he would have him.

Tommy was everything so quickly that it had given him whiplash, and yet Wilbur craved it.

Niki mentioned to him during an evening after he had returned to his shop, fixing a companion android a lonely little old woman had dropped off, how the bags under his eyes had started to fade.

"You look happy," she said softly, with a small smile.

"I think I am," he responded. "I think I'm... I'm helping him, Niki."

"I'm glad."

Red's beast was shaped under their hands, the body becoming more agile and more sinuous while the face lengthened into something more wolfish. It was far beyond something Wilbur had ever dared to work on, but it felt good. Any gaps in his knowledge were filled in by Tommy, and in turn Wilbur taught him a few tricks of his own.

The beast was ready a week from the event, and Wilbur stared up at the beast standing over him and Tommy with pride. It was just them in the hangar.

“Good fucking work,” Wilbur drug Tommy under his arm, wrapped it around his shoulders and held him close as Tommy smiled so wide it looked like it hurt.

“I’ve never had this much fun,” Tommy confessed. “All my other mechanics always kicked me out whenever I tried working on my beast. I... this was fun, Wilbur.”

Wilbur ruffled his hair fondly.

“Stop it!” Tommy wriggled under his arm, trapped there. “Fuckin bitch, stop messing up my hair!”

“Make me,” Wilbur laughed.

Tommy went limp, almost dragging Wilbur down with him. He grunted in the effort of keeping the lanky kid upright, and Tommy laughed in return.

“Prime, you’re so weak.”

“You are surprisingly heavy, you twerp.”

Tommy righted himself and – seemingly without thinking – resting his head against Wilbur’s shoulder. “I’m glad I met you.”

Wilbur swallowed hard. “I’m glad I met you too.”

They stood there for a moment, staring up at the beast. Wilbur squeezed Tommy’s shoulder, running his thumb over it. Growing up, he hadn’t had anyone. There had been the other scraprats, and the occasional adult who was kind, but Wilbur had spent so much of his life alone.

With Tommy at his side, Wilbur realized he didn’t want to be alone anymore.

“You know,” Wilbur started. “My apartment has an extra room. If you ever wanted to move out of this place.”

Tommy went stiff.

“But only if you wanted it!” Wilbur rushed to reassure him. “I mean, it’s really no big deal. But I’ve got a mattress. It wouldn’t be that hard to get you moved in if you wanted. I drive past this place on the way to my shop most days anyways, bringing you here for work here wouldn’t be a big deal at all. If you want it.”

“Wilbur, I—” Tommy started.

Before he could respond, there was the sound of footsteps behind them. The two turned, locked together briefly before they saw who it was. In a flash, Tommy had ducked away from

his arm and cowered away. That pure and genuine happiness turned to fear and the stony defensiveness that Wilbur had worked so hard at chipping through.

“Dream,” Tommy greeted. “What the fuck are you doing here?”

“Oh, come on now,” Dream chided, standing above them with two androids flanking him on either side. “Can I not check in on your new mechanics’ progress?”

“A week before the event?”

Dream ignored him, turning to Wilbur. Dream looked frozen in time. Maybe he was. Dumping credits into those treatments that would keep him young and handsome forever. Paying for mods that would slow the aging, or at least keep the illusion of it. His long blond hair hung around his shoulders, his unnaturally green eyes watching them. He was dressed simply in all black, but there was a gun on his thigh, and Wilbur’s fingers itched around a wrench in return.

“Soot,” Dream said. “I see you’ve made impressive work on this beast. Especially for someone with no background in beasts.”

“I’m just doing what I’m getting paid for,” Wilbur said, and jerked a thumb towards Tommy. “But I really can’t take all the credit. To—I mean, Red here is a natural with this stuff. You’d think he was raised on it.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Wilbur saw Tommy flinch. Hard.

“Really,” Dream said without a trace of emotion to his voice. “I see the two of you have been spending quite a lot of time together.”

Before Wilbur could answer, Tommy stepped in front of him.

“Not really,” Tommy said with such forced casualty that Wilbur winced. God, the kid couldn’t lie to save his life. “I barely know the guy.”

Dream chuckled. “Red. What did we say about lying? To me, the person who saved you. After everything I do for you.”

“I’m not!” Tommy’s voice took on a hint of panic. “Really, Dream. He’s just helped out here. He’s just a good grease monkey. Honestly, Dream. Dream he’s just a mechanic. He’s no one special, I fuckin’ promise. I swear.”

Wilbur felt his heart drop, that building warmth going cold. His words were desperate. His hands flew, each word punctuated by a point or a wide gesture. Tommy rocked on his feet, as if fighting between where to fall.

Dream or Wilbur.

“Why don’t you go back to your room? Hmm?” Dream stepped aside and one of the androids stepped up. “The droid will make sure you make it back. Safe and sound, alright?”

Tommy opened and closed his mouth, reminding Wilbur of the goldfish Jack kept in a giant tank in the diner. For a moment he almost believed Tommy would fight back. He always fought back. He was stubborn, and annoying, and loud. But he didn't. Tommy made a frustrated noise in the back of his throat and followed the android.

As he left, Tommy threw a look back at Wilbur. Those gray-blue eyes wide and afraid.

"I'll see you tomorrow!" Wilbur called after him. Just like he always said every day.

Tommy jerked his head in a nod.

"It's really not kind of you to be giving the boy false hope like that."

Wilbur's eyes snapped to Dream. The man was smiling at him, but it didn't reach his eyes. His hands were clasped behind his back. As Tommy disappeared out of the massive garage, four more androids stepped up behind Dream. Wilbur grew tense, eyes darting between them.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Wilbur said carefully. "We're just friendly."

"Really now. You expect me to believe that you're just '*friendly*.' That you don't make Red believe that you actually care about him. You expect me to believe that you aren't using Red's easy feelings against him." Dream responded. "I have eyes everywhere. This is *my* venue, Soot. *My* domain. You are playing on a battlefield you didn't even know existed, and you want to claim what I can see for myself?"

"He's just a plug." Wilbur lied, hot rage building behind his eyes. "What do you care who he's friends with?"

Dream stepped down into Red's area with fluid grace, the androids following. Wilbur took a step back, his heels hitting the tools they had yet to put away. His back hit the base of the beast, trapping him as Dream pinned him there under his gaze.

"Take a friendly warning," Dream said, and one of the androids moved so quickly Wilbur barely saw it move. He felt it however, as its fist plunged into his gut. The air was punched out of his lungs and Wilbur collapsed with an airless gasp and a groan. Dream smiled down at him. "I wouldn't recommend coming back tomorrow."

"You hired me," Wilbur gasped, trying to fill his lungs.

"A mistake, I'm now realizing," Dream said, brushing him off. "I thought you would be like every other one of those pathetic grease monkeys who clawed their way in here looking for a bit of recognition. For a bit of my credits. You weren't supposed to actually *care* about the brat."

Wilbur choked as the android kicked him, dropping him back to the ground from where he'd raised onto shaky hands and knees.

"You were supposed to think he was annoying."

Kick to his gut, pain radiating as he couldn't breathe yet again.

“You were supposed to give up on him when he got clingy and needy.”

Kick to his shoulder. Something went *pop* as it dislocated and Wilbur screamed.

“Red is nothing to you. He was never meant to be anything to anyone but *me*. I am everything he needs. Red is a whiny, pestering bug that needs my hand to become anything special. He’s nothing to all of you pathetic do-gooders. Red is mine.”

Kick to his torso. To his legs. One caught him across his jaw and Wilbur felt blood fill his mouth.

“I fucking made him. *I made him*. You’re nothing but another disappointment in his life. Someone else who can never realize his potential like I can, because I crafted him.” Dream said. “He belongs to *me*.”

“Tommy is a person,” Wilbur spat, spit and blood flew from his lips as he heaved for air.

Dream’s voice twisted into something dark as Wilbur said Tommy’s name. The smile remained, permanent like his announcer’s false smiley, but it was dangerous. Wilbur just grinned. Prime, he hadn’t felt like this since he was a scraprat. The sick thrill of getting the shit kicked out of him as he still *won*.

“I’ll repeat myself,” Dream said slowly. “Red belongs to me, and you would be smart to disappear. I will wire you the credits for your work, and a little incentive to disappear. Be smart, Soot.”

The androids all gave him one last kick before leaving with Dream. His footsteps echoed throughout the empty warehouse. Wilbur’s pained gasps filled his own ears, mixing with his own deafening heartbeat.

“Fuck that,” Wilbur said between agonized breaths. “F-fuck. That.”

“What do you fucking mean I can’t come in?”

The bouncer out front of the *Bitch Slap Underground* shrugged. “Sorry, man. Bosses’ orders.”

“Your boss is a fuckin bitch.”

The bouncer laughed, but pointed away. “Get lost.”

Every day, Wilbur tried to get back in. Every day he was turned away. The bouncer grew less and less friendly, even though he seemed mildly amused by Wilbur’s bullheaded stubbornness. It took five days of trying – the next fight growing closer and closer along with

the level of patheticness his pleas to be let back in were becoming – before Wilbur complained to Niki.

She was anything but sympathetic.

“What did you expect?” She said, juggling some ball bearings as Wilbur stalked around his workshop. “You were just going to swoop in and save the day with some nice words? The kid is under some contract with Dream. There’s nothing you can do.”

“I can’t just do nothing! You don’t get it, Niki. Tommy is... he’s so *good*. He smart, and hilarious, and he loves animals even though he’s never even seen one. He loves those sugary drinks, and he loves the color blue. He wants to see the world someday, and he sings so badly but he doesn’t care what anyone thinks about that. He has so much potential, but he’s trapped in that fucking prison and I can’t... I can’t just *leave* him!”

Niki scoffed. “And you think you can give him any of that? Wilbur, we’re from the Dregs. We die here, just like everyone else.”

“Oh, fuck off, Niki!” Wilbur snapped. “You might have given up, but I’m not going to. Not on him.”

A ball bearing hit the floor.

Wilbur turned to see Niki staring at him with those unsettling void eyes. The tech inlaid into her skull was black today, matching those eyes. Her head was cocked, almost like a bird. She fiddled with the remaining metal beads in her hands.

“What are you willing to do for this kid, hm?” She asked. “A kid you met a month ago. Someone who should mean nothing to you. You picked him because you were curious. You picked him because you try to help even when you know it’s hopeless. It’s hopeless, Wilbur Soot. Why haven’t you given up yet?”

“He deserves more than we've got.”

And that was it.

At the end of it all, that was it. Tommy deserved more than Manburg could give him. He deserved more than Dream, or Wilbur, or anyone could give him. He deserved real animals and a sky that wasn’t dimly gray. He deserved a world that let him hone that brilliant mind. He deserved a family that loved him, and not a pale imitation in strangers.

“I’d give all this up for him.” Wilbur said. “All of it. Ace, this shop, my standing here. I don’t fucking know what I’m doing, Niki. But I’ve never... I’ve never met something like Tommy. I don’t want to give up on him. I can’t.”

“Okay then,” she said. She hopped off of his work table and handed him the ball bearings. “I’ll get you a ticket to the fight.”

“Wait, really?”

“Wilbur,” Niki said, her voice low and serious. “Despite what you might believe of me, I believe people can be kind. That they can be good, despite this shithole of a world we live in. That’s what I fight for. So, if you need my help protecting that tiny flame, I’ll become an arsonist for you.”

“That was the most threatening way I’ve ever heard someone confess to friendship,” Wilbur said, giving her a half grin. She slugged his newly healed arm and he yelped.

“Get your kid,” she said. “I’ll handle the rest.”

The day of the fight, Jack lent him a mask to hide his face. Niki lent him clothes to disguise him further, dressing him in blacks and reds and yellows. Wilbur slipped his emerald necklace over his head. She pressed the ticket to his hand and whispered luck into his ear.

The pounding of the music and roar of metal tearing through metal filled his veins as he entered the venue. The adrenaline and the lights and the bile at the back of his throat felt like an old friend as he stalked through the crowd.

Every step was familiar to the steps he had taken a month ago. This time, however, they moved with purpose as he walked to the arena. Already he could hear Dream yelling out over the crowd, announcing the fights.

Wilbur’s eyes searched the crowds.

No Red.

He had been expecting that. Tommy hadn’t hung out on the main floor the first time. He remembered asking him about that in those long hours. Asking him why he didn’t mingle with his fans. Why he didn’t soak in the fame.

“He doesn’t... I mean I don’t like people knowing who I am,” Tommy had said.

Wilbur gritted his teeth and changed his target from a lanky teen to something a bit larger.

There, at the bar casually talking with a small crowd of adoring fans with green hair spiked and wide shoulders thrown back. Wilbur marched towards Warden, weaving his way through the writhing bodies.

As he reached him, Wilbur tapped his shoulder to draw his attention. The moment Warden looked over at him, Wilbur stood on his toes to whisper into Warden’s ear. “Come with me, or I’ll let all those betting suitors know you’re actually entangled with your own mechanic.”

A massive hand wrapped around his upper arm. Forced to stay on his toes, Wilbur’s covered eyes behind his mask met Warden’s own furious ones. For a split-second Wilbur knew he had

fucked up, but then Warden said calmly, "Excuse me, I'll be back with you all in a moment."

Warden drug Wilbur through a side door, slamming it behind him and trapping the two of them in a long hallway lined with slip den doors.

"What the fuck do you want?" Warden hissed.

Wilbur slipped his mask to the side, letting Warden see his face before replacing it. "You know what I'm here for."

"You cannot be serious."

"Deadly."

Warden's eyes narrowed. "You want Red. How the fuck do you think you're going to pull that off?"

"Well, I sort of need to find him first."

"You're an idiot." Warden threw up his hands. "An actual idiot. You're going to get yourself killed. Do you have any idea how fucking closely Dream watches Red? The guy is practically Dream's own kid with the way he keeps tabs on him."

"He is a kid."

Warden's eyes darted away uncomfortably. "He's nineteen."

"Do you honestly believe that?" Wilbur felt rage burning low in his gut.

"Look," Warden said. "We all know there's some weird shit going on with Red. He's been fighting for years and nobody outside the workers here know his face, and nobody even knows his name. Anyone who even touches him gets fucked up. Do you think I didn't try? I knew there was something wrong with how Dream treated him, but the moment I tried to help..." Warden closed his eyes and took a deep breath before meeting Wilbur's eyes with almost desperation. "Ponk lost an arm. They said it was an accident, but I knew. We all knew. Dream doesn't fuck around when it comes to Red, because Red is the best damn plug anyone has ever seen. Leave it, Soot."

"No. I'm so sorry, but no."

"Then you're dead."

Wilbur laughed coldly. "I'd take death over cowardice."

Warden returned the laugh, defeated and pissed. "Your fucking funeral. Red is always in a slip den before fights. Dream fucking hates it, but he always finds a way in. He's in Room 16."

"Thank you," Wilbur said. "I won't forget this."

“Please do, actually.” Warden turned away. “I’ll mourn you and your damned stupidity. It was entertaining.”

Warden left, and Wilbur turned to the hall of slip den doors.

They were all the same, save for the golden metal engraved above them. Wilbur practically ran down the hallway until he reached 16. Reaching it, he shoved it open to see Tommy laid out on the beanbag, a toxstik in his hand. The VR set up laid next to him, untouched. Tommy was staring blankly at the wall, slowly taking a drag from the stik.

“Fuck off, Dream.” He muttered. “I get another hour.”

“Tommy,” Wilbur breathed.

Gray-blue eyes met dull red.

“W-Wilbur!” Tommy leapt to his feet, dropping the toxstik as he rushed forwards and launched himself into Wilbur’s open arms. “I thought you left.”

“I’m not leaving. He can’t make me leave you. Not forever.”

“Wilbur, I...” Tommy pulled back. God, he was so young. So fucking *human* that it pulled at Wilbur’s lungs, his heart, his soul. He reached up, holding Tommy’s face and he let him hold him for that moment. Let him keep him. Tommy’s eyes filled with tears. Not spilling over, but Wilbur ran his thumb under his eye.

“It’s okay,” Wilbur said.

He wanted to hold him. He wanted to hug Tommy so tight that he never forgot what it was like to be hugged. Wilbur wanted to take him away, but Tommy was pulling back. He was shaking.

“No, it’s not,” Tommy said. His jaw was wobbling, tears threatening his lash line. “Wilbur, he fucking owns me.”

Wilbur’s blood ran cold. “What?”

“I can’t leave. Not yet, anyways. I owe him. I owe him so much. I can’t leave with you. I can’t live in your extra room, I can’t go to that ice cream place you won’t shut up about, and I can’t be... I can’t, Wilbur. I can’t ride on your bike, or be a kid like you keep telling me I should be.”

“What are you talking about, Tommy?”

“I...” Tommy choked. “My parents owed Dream so many credits. They gambled here all the time. They racked up so much debt that they legally owed Dream *everything*. But then they fucking died, and it was all left on me. I... I was seven. Dream got guardianship of me, but that wasn’t what he wanted. He wanted his money back.”

The frigid cold spread throughout Wilbur's body, rising into his heart and turning his fingers numb.

"He didn't—"

"I got my plug when I was ten," Tommy said. "It's the only way I can pay him back. I have to pay him back, Wilbur. I owe him everything. God, he could have just left me on the streets, but he gave me a bed and food and he let me be the best fucking plug in Manburg. I have to pay it all back, and then I can leave."

"That's why he rescheduled the fight," Wilbur realized. "You're close to paying it off."

"I just need seven hundred thousand credits," Tommy nodded, bouncing on the balls of his feet. "I'm so close, and then I can go with you."

"But he isn't going to let you go."

"No, he promised!" Tommy argued. "He promised. After this fight I'll only owe him fifty thousand. So, two more fights. Just two more fights, Wilbur. I can do that. I promise I can do that."

Wilbur knew Dream wouldn't let him go. Those words as he had beaten Wilbur into the concrete were burned into his mind. *Mine*, he had said. Shudders ran up his spine at the language he had used. Tommy was just a bug, like he had claimed. Something to keep in a jar and poke when things got boring.

Dream wouldn't let him go. Not when he had found someone to perform surgery on a fucking child. Had altered him to fight when he was only ten years old.

Wilbur's thoughts jumped from stupid to insane. He could fix this. He could, he just had too...

He had something to fix this.

"What if I can get you fifty thousand tonight?"

Tommy's eyes widened. "What? How?!"

"Just trust me. I can get it for you tonight. If your debt is cleared, will you come with me?"

Tommy hesitated, his eyes searching Wilbur's. Frantic, desperate, hopeful. He reached for Wilbur, and Wilbur drew him into a hug that crushed.

"You know," Tommy mumbled into Wilbur's jacket. "I always wanted an older brother."

Wilbur choked on sudden tears. "Don't say that, I will cry."

Tommy laughed, wet with his own repressed sobs.

The two held each other for as long as they could. Standing in the slip den, holding onto the chance of a future. The idea of a family. Something neither of them had dared to dream of for so long that was now here. Only a fight and a sacrifice away.

Wilbur tangled his fingers into Tommy's hair, holding him close. Those three biotech fingers. The stains and callouses and *life* they spelled out, holding onto his future. Wilbur had always relied on his hands to guide him. To take him out of the Dregs and into something better.

His hands were what gave him this. The long hours of learning machines, of dancing over handlebars, of wrapping around bottles shared with neighbors. His hands, taking him to Tommy.

He clung as tightly as he could.

Eventually, Tommy said that he had to leave for the fight. Wilbur hugged him one last time before letting him go. Both their eyes were rimmed with red, but they grinned brightly at each other.

"See you later," Tommy said for the first time, and reached behind him to trigger the helmet.

"Go kick their ass." Wilbur returned, and watched Tommy run out of the room.

He watched him go. Watched him disappear into the crowd, and listened as the crowd roared at the arrival of Red and Warden.

He knew Tommy would win the fight. He didn't need to watch. Wilbur pulled out his comm and dialed Niki. It rang once before she picked up.

"Are you okay?" She asked.

Wilbur huffed out a laugh. "I'm fine. I actually need a favor from you."

"Another one?"

"Look, I'm just racking up my debts to you," Wilbur winced at the word debts, but hurriedly pressed on. "You know Ace? My bike?"

"Yeah, of course I do."

"I need you to find one of your weird underground connections and fast who wants a custom bike. Selling it cheap. Sixty thousand credits."

"... you can't be serious. Ace is your baby!"

"It's for Tommy. Please, Niki."

There was silence on the other end. The crackle of the comm was deafening in his ear as he waited for his one shot. Niki sighed.

"He really means that much, huh?"

“He called me his brother.” Wilbur laughed. “Yeah. He does.”

“Okay. I found you a buyer. The credits will be yours within the hour.”

“Thank you, Niki. Thank you.”

“Idiot,” she said fondly, and hung up.

Wilbur slipped the comm into his pocket and ran back into the crowd. He ran, shoving anyone in his way, completely uncaring at the outraged cries after him as he ran and ran until he reached the edge of the arena. He could see Dream, hovering above them all in his booth, but he only spared him a satisfied grin before his attention was on the beasts below.

Tommy was winning. The cheers for *Red! Red! Red!* shook the walls as the beast crawled around Warden's body, tearing chunks out of him as he slowly tore the beast apart. There was nothing to argue against it. A fair fight.

Pieces of metal littered the packed dirt below, but Tommy's beast appeared completely intact. As he turned, Wilbur saw one of his tails had been torn off, but Tommy was winning. He was winning!

Tommy ducked under a claw from Warden and launched himself onto the mane. Scrambling up, ignoring the animalistic screeches of rage from Warden. Digging his claws in, Tommy bit down on the unprotected bit between mane and the face.

His teeth sank into it, thrashing his head back and forth until with a spark and an agonized roar, Warden shuddered still.

“TOMMY!” Wilbur screamed; his voice lost in the thousands of others cheering for Red. Wilbur looked over where Tommy's body lay. He saw his eyes blink open. He saw the grin split his face in pure relief. In joy.

He was free.

Wilbur turned and ran for the stairs to the underground, just as Tommy turned and ran himself.

Thud, thud, thud. His feet were a rhythm played out on concrete, hopeful and ecstatic. He brushed past the workers and plugs. He ignored every stare, taking the stairs two, three at a time. He ran and ran and ran until he was slamming the doors open. Beasts were being dragged to the underground warehouse he had spent the last month in, but Wilbur was running towards the entrance to the arena. His feet flew, jacket whipping in the wind, and there was Tommy.

They crashed into each other, laughing and crying and *happy*.

“I got the money,” Wilbur said. “I got it. You can leave. You're free.”

“Wilbur,” Tommy cried into his chest. “You're such a fucking bastard, you know that? Fucking dickhead.”

“I know,” Wilbur laughed through his tears. “I know, I know.”

“Come on.” Tommy grabbed his hand. “I gotta go get my shit. Then we pay Dream and,” his face lit up. So, so fucking bright. “We can leave.”

They walked, hand in hand. Tommy practically dragging him in his eagerness. They walked, and Wilbur felt giddy laughter bubble up and overflow. He was going to get Tommy out of here. Far away from this corner of the Dregs. They’d try and save up to leave Manburg. He would take him to see a cow. He would take him somewhere he could see the sun.

They were leaving.

Tommy’s room was practically bare. He threw together the few clothes he had, shoving them into a bag along with a ratty stuffed animal and his radio. He closed the door without a final look, grinning up at Wilbur, and Wilbur smiled down at him.

The potential of a brother. The potential of a life.

“He’ll be in the hanger,” Tommy said, still clinging to Wilbur’s hand, like he thought if he let go then Wilbur would disappear. Wilbur couldn’t blame him. His own hands were aching from how tightly he clung to Tommy as well. “Come on, come on!”

The hanger was alive with commotion. Beasts being dragged into their areas. Plugs rushing around with their mechanics. Androids and robots rushing underfoot, trying to keep everything clean and orderly. And there, waiting by Tommy’s beast, was Dream.

“I thought I told you not to come back,” Dream snarled at Wilbur.

Wilbur’s hand tightened around Tommy’s. Dream’s eyes darted down to it, then back up.

“I’m leaving.” Tommy said. “With Wilbur.”

Dream stared blankly, then burst out laughing. Doubled over, holding his gut laughing. “Oh, wow.” He said, mirth running from his eyes that he wiped away. “Good one, brat. But if I’m not mistaken, you are still under contract with me.”

“And I have enough to absolve the contract,” Tommy shot back. He let go of Wilbur’s hand to dig into his pocket, and Wilbur did the same. The two held up the credit transfers and watched as realization crept across Dream’s face.

“We’re leaving,” Wilbur said quietly. “You can have it all, but *we* are leaving.”

Dream stared, one hand coming up to tap against his jaw. His eyes – so sickly green – turned dark and angry. His lips curled into a manic smile, and hysterical laughter hiccupped out of him. Wilbur glanced down at Tommy uncertainly, but the kid stared down Dream unflinching.

“You would leave me.” Dream said. “Me. You would leave me for *him*.”

“A thousand times over, you absolute bastard.” Tommy spat.

A pause, and then Dream pulled out his comm. Instead of reaching forwards to tap it against theirs and accept the credit transfer, he pressed a button and raised it to his mouth. A crackle echoed over the speakers above and he said, "Everyone out."

All work froze and every eye drifted their way.

"I said *OUT!*" Dream screamed.

The hanger turned into a mad dash for the door. Within seconds they were alone. Tommy nervously reached back and took Wilbur's hand again.

"You know," Dream said, stalking forwards. "I always considered you a friend, Tommy. My *best* friend. I trusted you to stay with me until the end. I wanted you by my side, but I knew that your stupid little brain just needed a little convincing. But you just couldn't leave it alone, now could you. You just had to run to the first idiot who gave you... what? Attention? As if you needed more. You were always so fucking *needy*."

"Shut up," Tommy said, but his voice wavered. "Wilbur's my friend. He's my brother."

"Just take the credits." Wilbur said. "We don't need to drag this out."

"He is *mine*," Dream yelled. "My plug. My best plug! I fucking made him. You can't take him away just because he thinks he knows what's best. He doesn't. Red never fucking did."

Tommy shifted, standing firmly between Wilbur and Dream, and said, "You can't change my mind."

"Oh, don't worry. I know. I know you made your fucking choice." Dream reached down for the gun, unholstering it in one motion. "You chose to *leave me!*"

Fuck.

Wilbur never thought things through. He acted on his emotions. He acted on what felt right in the moment. On what he thought was true to him. In that moment, nothing felt more right than grabbing Tommy's shoulders and whipping him around, switching their places as Dream pulled the trigger.

"WILBUR!"

He screamed as the bullet tore through his back. Blood burst through his clothes, soaking as he collapsed in pain. Tommy scrambled to catch him – to hold him – but he wasn't strong enough. Best plug fighter in Manburg, and he was still a scrawny, weak kid.

Wilbur slipped to the floor, hands clutching tight to Tommy's arms.

Dream laughed. "Oh my god! You really did convince him you were worth something. Prime, Tommy, I gotta hand it to you. You're not just a pest, you're a parasite!"

"Wilbur," Tommy begged. "Wilbur, stand up. Please, Wilbur. Stand up!"

“Run,” Wilbur gasped between the pain ripping through him. “Tommy—”

“Not without you!”

The two had fallen near the dip into the beast’s area. One of Wilbur’s legs slipped over the edge, and he was threatening to drag Tommy down with him. Wilbur closed his eyes as the pain turned white hot. Blood was soaking through his back. It wasn’t a fatal hit, he didn’t think, but that didn’t matter.

Dream was standing over them with enough bullets to finish the job and make it hurt in the meantime.

“Don’t worry, you’ll go to the same place.” Dream said, hysterical and manic laughter still dripping from his voice. “The same fucking empty void. Maybe you can really be family there, huh? Brothers in death.”

“Please run. Just fucking run!” Wilbur begged, but Tommy was stubborn. Just like Wilbur. Just like he loved about him. That stupid stubbornness as Tommy turned to stare down Dream.

Dream aimed the gun at Tommy’s chest and grinned. “You were fun while you lasted.”

“TOMMY!” Wilbur screamed; his voice choked on the pain. He yanked on him, dragging him down just enough that the bullet clipped through Tommy’s shoulder. Tommy screamed, the force of the bullet throwing him into the beast dip and taking Wilbur with him. Wilbur cried out as he landed on his back, pain tearing through him.

“You’re really just making this more fun for me,” Dream cackled. “Letting you have a fraction of the pain I put into raising your ungrateful ass. I didn’t even want you, you know? Your pathetic parents took so many bets without thinking of the consequences of *you*. Your parasitic residue on this world. Nobody has ever wanted you, Tommy. Nobody but me. And now nobody can ever have you!”

“Hey, listen to me,” Wilbur whispered, every word taut with agony. Tommy’s shoulder was shattered, blood and flesh dripping onto Wilbur’s chest but he didn’t care. “I wanted you. You were the best thing to happen to me, kid. I mean that.”

“Wilbu—AHHH!”

Tommy was cut off with a scream as Dream kicked him, sending him sprawling away from Wilbur. Wilbur reached for him, but Dream stomped down on his hand. Wilbur screamed as his fingers crunched under his boot. He felt his knuckles tear through his skin as they were crushed against the concrete. Dream stomped and stomped, turning his hand into pulp.

“Stop it! Stop it!” Tommy screamed over Wilbur’s own. “STOP!”

“Oh, that was *cathartic*,” Dream said with relish. “I wonder how long you could hold out if I just. Kept. Stomping. Up.”

Between each other his boot moved up his hand. His palm shattered. Then his wrist.

“STOP!” Tommy screamed.

“You took him from me,” Dream said, leaning down to get into Wilbur’s face. “I know how much those hands mean to you. I know how much hands mean to any mechanic. Any grease monkey. So, I’m going to take them from you, and then I’m going to kill you. Then I’ll kill him. How does that sound, Soot?”

Before Wilbur could even attempt to formulate a response through the haze of pain, there was a sudden hum in the air. The sound of grinding gears and shifting metal grew as the beast next to them began to move.

“For fucks sake.” Dream spat.

Tommy had dragged himself over to the plug port they kept for testing. The cable extended from his slumped body, and above them the beast began to move.

“Oh, *Tommy*,” Dream yelled tauntingly. “I think you forget one important detail about your fucking beast here.” He stood from where he was crouched over Wilbur and walked over to Tommy’s limp form.

“No, no, no, no!” Wilbur yelled, but as he tried to pull himself up, he collapsed. The pain was too much. He had lost so much blood, and his hand was a mangled lump of flesh and bone. “Dream, don’t!”

“Say bye-bye!” Dream laughed, and shot Tommy between his eyes.

“NO!”

The beast shuddered and stopped moving. Blood and bits of brain and skull were plastered to the plug port behind it. Dream was laughing and laughing and Wilbur could only stare. His vision wobbled in and out as he stared. No, he wasn’t... there was no way... Tommy was... he was...

“I was really hoping he could watch *you* die,” Dream said. “But I suppose it doesn’t really matter.”

“I’m going to kill you!” Wilbur screamed. “I’ll fucking kill you!”

Dream rolled his eyes. “Oh, really now I don’t thi—”

CRUNCH!

In one swift movement, the beast’s head swooped down and locked its jaws around Dream. One moment he was standing there, and the next netherite teeth were torn between his ribs. The beast screamed like an animal. Like a *person*. It shook and Dream was torn apart without even a noise escaping a mouth that was swallowed by mechanical jaws.

It shook and shook, flinging blood and gore everywhere and Wilbur could only stare in horrified awe.

Finally, the beast tossed Dream's body aside. It splattered against the walkway in a smear. The beast turned to Wilbur. His breath hitched.

"T-Tommy?"

The beast let out a low rumbling noise and bowed his head.

"Oh my god."

Wilbur turned and threw up.

The shock was settling in. Wilbur's entire body was numb through the flashes of agony radiating up his arm. He stared with blank eyes at the massive beast above him that was his best friend. Wheezing breaths escaped his lungs in short huffs. He couldn't look down. He couldn't look at Tommy's corpse. He simply stared at the beast and let himself drift.

Tommy dipped his head and nudged the body. He huffed, as if he could will the bone and brain back together, but he couldn't. The body was beyond repair. Tommy was dead... but he wasn't. He was in the beast.

Tommy was in the beast.

Tommy turned and moved to Wilbur. He opened his mouth and gently – so fucking gently – scooped Wilbur up into his mouth. Wilbur's mangled arm fell through the gap between his teeth and he whimpered. Tommy rumbled in what might have been an apology. Then he was moving, walking towards the exit.

"Tommy," Wilbur wheezed. "Tommy, I'm so sorry. I'm so fucking sorry."

The beast rumbled, and he could almost hear Tommy's exasperated voice say, "*Shut up.*"

"I'm so sorry." He couldn't stop saying it. He couldn't stop.

Tommy carried him, and somewhere Wilbur passed out. The dark spots took over his vision as his voice went hoarse repeating those three words over and over, and blood dripped to the floor.

Wilbur woke up slowly and then all at once. The room blearily came into focus, and all Wilbur could think was how much he wanted to go see Tommy. He wanted to go back to the warehouse... did he? No, he wanted to take Tommy out on Ace. He wanted to let him feel the wind rush through his hair. He wanted to let him try ice cream.

And then he remembered.

Wilbur bolted upright, a scream of “Tommy!” tearing from him. Arms met his shoulders and he flinched back.

Niki stood over him. Her eye bags were worse. Her tech implants weren’t even on. She was wearing bloodstained clothing, and she was holding him with barely steadied hands.

“Where is he?” Wilbur asked.

“In the shop.” She answered. “I had to clear everything out just to get him to fit, but he’s here. Tommy is... he’s here.”

Wilbur clutched Niki with one hand. His other was wrapped in thick layers of nanomed wrap. He could feel the tiny bots squirming over his skin as they tried to repair the bone and muscle. It was horribly itchy, but he ignored it. Tommy was...

“He’s dead.” Wilbur said, and the dam broke.

Sobs wracked through him, tearing him apart. He failed. He fucking failed, and Tommy was dead. He was never going to escape, and Dream had won.

“It’s not over yet.” Niki said, squeezing his good hand. “Wilbur, listen to me. You can still help him.”

“W-what?” Wilbur cried. “You saw him, Niki. He’s dead. Or good as dead. He’s fucking trapped in that thing! That’s not living, that’s just... he’s... oh god.”

Wilbur rolled over and vomited all over the floor.

Niki rubbed soothing circles into his back as he choked up nothing but stomach acid. Deep and roiling hatred burned through him. His failure was like a brand in his destroyed hand. In the hole in his back. Wilbur wanted to close his eyes and slip away, but Niki wouldn’t let him.

She wasn’t letting him join Tommy.

“Just fucking kill me,” Wilbur groaned through the heaves of his stomach. “Oh god, just kill me.”

“Shut up and listen to me.” Niki said. “I can help Tommy.”

“How?” Wilbur said hopelessly. “You saw him. You saw the... The beast”

“I did. He’s a smart fucking kid, Wilbur. You were right about that,” Niki smiled sadly.

“Tommy turned off all the inhibitors before he uploaded himself. Every piece of him got transferred into his beast, so when his body died his mind was able to keep going. It won’t last forever, but he saved himself, Wilbur. He saved *you*.”

Wilbur gaped up at her. Tommy wasn’t... he wasn’t gone?

“I know some people,” Niki said softly. “This group I’m a part of. We’re called the Syndicate, and with their help we can save Tommy. We can get him a new body. Most likely mainly biotech, and maybe we can synthesize a body, but we can save him.”

The relief was harsh and almost worse than the grief. Wilbur cried and cried as Niki held him. He could still save him.

He wasn’t done fighting. As his tears dried, and the sobs became unbearable, Niki helped him to his feet. He hobbled out of the room and into the main diner. Jack waved from behind the counter, concern evident on his lower jaw that could still emote, but Wilbur ignored him. He ignored all the patrons in the diner.

Out on the street, he walked as fast as Niki would let him until he was opening the shop door. Until he was falling into the room, landing on a metal snout that yipped in surprise.

“Tommy,” he said, and the beast purred underneath him.

It wasn’t over yet.

It wasn’t fucking over yet.

End Notes

If you liked, please check out my other fic Black Honey. I swear to god I'm actually gonna update it, I'm just very slow. And if enough people like this one I might write the sequel that'll have the rest of SBI in it. Ty for reading!

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!